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SUBLIME OBJECTIVE : FORM AND MEANING IN THE POETRY  
OF BASIL BUNTING

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BEING THE RESULT OF RESEARCH CARRIED OUT IN THE  
FACULTY OF ARTS

by

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## SUMMARY

Basil Bunting's place in modern English poetry is, like the man himself, difficult to fathom. At one extreme his work has found a loyal following verging at times on the sycophantic; at the other it has evoked a distrust of the "obscurity" of his method and forms, a sense of déjà vu, a feeling that a minor disciple of the modernist generation has been unworthily raised to the status of a master. Between these extremes lies a range of approval more or less qualified, but all of it labouring under the difficulties created by the paradoxical texture of Bunting's verse, which stresses clarity yet employs obscure allusion; is individualistic yet admittedly derives from lessons taught by many other poets; is much concerned with form (which in the Sonatas precedes subject matter, he claims) yet gives the impression of freedom and variety; is emotional in its themes yet is also somehow rigorous and contained; and is objective while tending constantly towards the sublime. This study examines the nature and sources of these paradoxical elements in Bunting's work, while at the same time carrying out some of the task of explication which must, it seems, take place before right critical judgment of such a "difficult" poet can be arrived at.

The first half deals with the external forces influencing the poetry. In Chapter II an attempt is made to find whether anything of the interesting detail of Bunting's life resolves itself into a central theme for his art. The seeds are uncovered of a quest myth of exile and heightened return which, as is later demonstrated, gives form to the whole. Chapter III examines his literary rather than personal history, and traces the influence on him of the series of poets whom he acknowledges in the Preface to Collected Poems. Although there is

something of interest to be found, I trust, on each of these poets, for my own part the sections which rediscover Bunting's connections with the English epic and pastoral traditions, with Wordsworth, Wyatt and in particular with Spenser, have proved most illuminating. The discussion of external forces is completed in Chapter IV, a closely argued consideration of influential aspects of music and syntax on Bunting's verse, which attempts to bring into alignment or harmony some at least of the diverse elements, attitudes and techniques encountered in earlier chapters.

Music is, of course, the point of entry into any consideration of formal elements in Bunting's poetry. In Chapter V the problem of form in modernist poetry is discussed, as well as the theory and practice of the Objectivist movement (in which Bunting played some part) and its attitude to form. Finally, following Bunting's example, the sonata forms within each of his Sonatas are examined in diagrammatic fashion, and the interplay and resolution of themes demonstrated. Chapter VI is devoted to a detailed analysis of the quest myth earlier mentioned, as it shapes and explains the diverse literary and personal materials of 'Briggflatts'. The theory of archetypal imagery on which this form is based is further examined in Chapter VII which suggests two means by which Bunting's complex poetry can and does communicate with audiences not wholly composed of research students. Chapter VIII brings the study to completion with a brief consideration of the sublime poem, and its metamorphosis in Bunting's hands.

As a whole, then, the study covers many problematic areas of Bunting's work, demonstrates why it takes the precise form it does, introduces much new material on the influence of other poets upon it, and discovers the great central theme which informs the work of this important and too long neglected poet.

## CHAPTER I : INTRODUCTION

Convinced of the value of Basil Bunting's poems, and feeling their power, I have attempted to discover a critical approach which will both illustrate their value and demonstrate their power. The need for such an approach is made clear by the contradictory views expressed by various critics and reviewers of his work as well as by the growing volume of scholarly work on the poetry which has, so far, not only failed to reveal its true worth but has sometimes done precisely what Bunting censures in criticism and literary biography, that is, distracted attention from the nature of the work itself.<sup>1</sup> The present study will examine the validity of various possible approaches to Bunting's poetry.

Critical discussion of any writer of worth can usually assume a fair amount of background knowledge on the reader's part, but the writer on Basil Bunting's poetry can assume nothing. What little has been discovered lies hidden for the most part in scholarly journals or back issues of newspapers and poetry magazines; and his reputation, though fairly high, is sometimes thought unwarranted. Any attempt, therefore, to deal with a single aspect of his work might tend to make the work seem trivial: there is as yet no cairn to add a stone to, merely a scattering of stones. Even G.S. Fraser, a loyal supporter of Bunting's poetry (we find him in 1964, for example, giving his copy of Poems 1950, the first comprehensive edition of the poems and now a collector's item, to the American poet Robert Creeley in an attempt to arouse interest in republishing it<sup>2</sup>) considers him to lack "a central core of feeling" which makes for a major poet, although he is "possibly the finest neglected craftsman of our time".<sup>3</sup>

The demonstration of such a central core of feeling in the poetry

seems to me not only possible but vital to an adequate appreciation of Basil Bunting's worth and true position in English poetry, and that is the objective towards which this study tends.

Briefly, I will be concerned with discovering a total form in Bunting's work, and, so far as this be possible, a total critical approach to it, as much from personal inclination and belief in its intrinsic merits as from the lack of such a sustaining body of criticism mentioned above.

If the poet is one who "traps Heaven and Earth in the cage of form,"<sup>4</sup> then the question of evaluation becomes one of the size and significance of his universe on the one hand, and of the intricacy, strength and craftsmanship of, so to speak, the bars of his cage on the other. The present work firstly explores Bunting's universe, approaching his poetry through biography, formative influences, literary history and tradition, and music and syntax, attempting thereby to gain some measure of its size and significance. Those approaches valid to a study of the poet's form (through poetic structure, symbolic and thematic exploration, and through myth) occupy the second part, in an attempt to convey the total unity of form, theme, purpose and experience which I take to be the special mark of this distinguished and too long neglected poet.

On a personal rather than a scholarly level, however, this dissertation might best be considered as an attempt to exorcise a voice that has haunted, and indeed shaped, my mind for many years now. The voice is Bunting's, of course, and the exorcism achieved by as comprehensive an analysis as I can manage of the spirit of the man and of its manifestations in art, his Sonatas and Odes.

It was ten years ago that my undergraduate keen but indiscriminating appetite for new poetry prompted me to reach in a

university bookshop for the paperback edition of Briggflatts published by Fulcrum Press in 1967. I opened the book to flick through the pages in the usual way, but found myself caught, senses, mind, emotions all held, in a way seldom experienced before or since, and never to the same degree, by the words on the page and the sound of the words in my head:

Brag, sweet tenor bull,  
 descant on Rawthey's madrigal,  
 each pebble its part  
 for the fells' late spring.  
 Dance tiptoe, bull,  
 black against may.  
 Ridiculous and lovely  
 chase hurdling shadows  
 morning into noon.  
 May on the bull's hide  
 and through the dale  
 furrows fill with may,  
 paving the slowworm's way.

The odd thing was that, though the words were simple and the images clear, I knew that I did not grasp the significance or the context of the words that so held me. Much of my thinking in the intervening years has been an attempt to explain the nature and cause of that strange effect of literary capture, and to establish for myself a significance and a context for Bunting's words.

Was I the victim of an effect that P.J. Kavanagh has recently discussed?

"Somewhere, Coleridge suddenly says: 'Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood.' At first, that's startling; it seems to offer a cloak for every posturing loon in love with the sound of his own voice. But, after a moment's thought, we know that it is perfectly true. We have all been moved, pleased, intrigued by groups of words we did not wholly understand at first - or even at last. That is, we didn't understand them with that part of our minds we call our understanding, yet we seemed to understand them in some other way." <sup>5</sup>

Now Basil Bunting would prefer that we leave matters at that; indeed he makes a virtue of imperfect understanding to an extreme degree:

"There is no need of any theory for what gives pleasure through the ear, music or poetry. The theoreticians will follow the artist and fail to explain him. The sound, whether it be in words or notes, is all that matters. It is perfectly possible to delight an audience by reading poetry of sufficient quality in a language it does not know. I have seen some of Goethe, some of Hafiz, produce nearly the same effect they would have produced on an audience familiar with German or Persian." <sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere in the same volume we find "There is no excuse for literary criticism, " but, as Jonathan Williams sensibly remarks, "what literary gent will subscribe to that?" Bunting himself has written articles and reviews which can only be described as literary criticism. <sup>7</sup> The question arises, which must later be answered, of why he does adopt this view, and whether it serves to date him. Is this the voice of experience or of wilful befuddlement? Does it betray inherent secretiveness or lack of confidence, or arrogance? Or is it a Poundian stance, the poet fossilized, as it were, in an attitude struck a lifetime ago?

Whatever the answer, Bunting has grudgingly admitted the use of criticism in respect of Pound's poetry: "Twenty years later a few critics began to see what Pound had been doing; explanations multiplied, some of them fairly good." <sup>8</sup>

The same could not be said for Bunting's own poetry. In 1973 Anthony Suter, reviewing Roger Guedalla's Basil Bunting: A Bibliography of Works and Criticism, complained:

"Whole poems still await critical commentary, important general aspects of the poetry, such as imagery, symbolism, and not least, musical effects, the sonata, ideogrammic and structural elements, have not yet been fully treated in published works," <sup>9</sup>

and nothing I have read since has convinced me that matters have altered to any significant extent.

This is not to say that nothing of worth has been written about Bunting's poetry: one thinks of the essays of Kenneth Cox, Herbert

Read and Charles Tomlinson in Agenda 4, Nos. 5 & 6 (Autumn 1966), of Roger Guedalla's bibliography,<sup>10</sup> of Kenneth Cox's "A Commentary on Basil Bunting's 'Villon,'" <sup>11</sup> recommended by Bunting as a useful introduction to his method.<sup>12</sup> But these, though fine, are, with the exception of the latter, devoted mainly to the exploration of general features of Bunting's poetry - his aesthetic, the function of music, and so forth, and while they offer intelligent analysis of line and phrase, do not attempt, or within their limits hint at, any comprehensive view of the whole content or form of the poetry which they discuss so well in detail and in part. I am interested to discover why the details are there to begin with, what were the shaping influences on the poet's choice of material and forms, and why he has organised the material with such obvious care in precisely its present form and not another. This has not previously been done.

In trying to remedy this situation I have used a number of critical approaches, but chiefly one which might be called a kind of homeopathic criticism. I am thinking here of the work of Northrop Frye, specifically of the way in which his style has captured the imagination of younger literary critics. As Murray Krieger has said, whatever attitude we adopt towards Frye's prodigious scheme outlined in the Anatomy of Criticism, we cannot doubt his "absolute hold" on a generation of developing critics, a hold greater and more exclusive than that of any other theorist in recent critical history.<sup>13</sup>

Now I single out Frye's style because I consider his influence comes not merely from, in Krieger's phrase, "the unequalled sweep with which his system claims to embrace our entire conceptual world", but from the sweeping effect of a style which has been censured by W.K. Wimsatt as "a kind of verbal shell game."<sup>14</sup> That the speed and energy of Frye's style enables him to get away with violations of logic and



order, and that "the rhythm of association," the discontinuous, the aphoristic, the oracular style "have for their object the attempt to break down or through the whole structure of verbal articulation" is anathema to Wimsatt, and it is precisely because I have experienced the attractiveness of that style - again the effect is of a confident and persuasive voice in the head - that I have tried patiently to put the matter to the test by treating like with like: Bunting with Frye and vice versa.

Bunting has been thought to possess some of the attributes of greatness in a poet but to lack a central core of feeling, some common touchstone of relevance and value; to offer moments and movements of skill and even magnificence yet to leave questions unanswered and notes unresolved into a final unity. In a similar way Frye's local insights have been admired, but his theoretical insights have been regarded sometimes as brilliant, more often perhaps as suspect: "his articulations of the archetype are true to his master Blake - both in degree of specificity and in degree of fantasy" comments Wimsatt, and Frye's twenty four overlapping divisions of the seasonal cycle of myths have likewise been treated with some scepticism.

Has either of these two marvellous rhetoricians anything to say to or for the other? Can they together prove the truth of the large claims which their respective words make on us? These are the questions I have attempted to answer, mainly in the second part of this study, which deals with such internal factors in Bunting's poetry as imagery and structure, but also, where appropriate, in my earlier estimation of external pressures of biographical and cultural influences on his matter and style.

The props for Frye's "verbal shell-game" are not at everyone's fingertips. Appendix A provides a summary of those parts of his schema

of which I make most frequent use, and within the text detailed reference is made to Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957).

# NOTES TO CHAPTER I

1. A view expressed in 'A Statement', Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal, ed. Jonathan Williams (Lexington, Ky., 1968). No pagination.
2. Robert Creeley, 'Basil Bunting: An Appreciation', Granta 71 (Cambridge, 6 November 1965), p.12.
3. G.S. Fraser, Nine 3, No. 3 (No. 3, April 1952), p.277.  
This early view is not revised in 'English Poetry 1930-1960', Sphere History of Literature in the English Language Vol.7: The Twentieth Century, ed. Bergonzi (London, 1970), p.299.
4. The Chinese poet Lu Chi, quoted by Archibald MacLeish, Poetry and Experience, (London, 1965), p.16.
5. 'Guessworks', The Listener Vol. 97, No. 2514 (23 June 1977), p.810.
6. 'A Statement' in Jonathan Williams, op.cit.
7. His early essays on Ezra Pound and E.E. Eliot seem to me still sensible, particularly on the latter. 'Mr. Ezra Pound', The New English Weekly 1, No. 6 (26 May 1932), pp. 137-138, and 'Mr. E.E. Eliot', The New English Weekly 1, No. 21 (8 September 1932), pp. 499-500.
8. "'Prince of Poets": Basil Bunting remembers Ezra Pound', Sunday Times (London, 12 November 1972), p.38.
9. Anthony Suter, in Agenda 11, Nos. 2-3 (Spring/Summer 1973) p.142.
10. Roger Guedalla, Basil Bunting: A Bibliography of Works and Criticism (Norwood, Pa., 1973).
11. Kenneth Cox, in Stony Brook 3 and 4 (Stony Brook, New York, Fall 1969), pp. 59-69.
12. In a letter to the author, dated 1 September 1973.
13. Editor's introduction, Northrop Frye in Modern Criticism. Selected Papers from the English Institute, ed. Murray Krieger (Columbia University Press, 1966).
14. W.K. Wimsatt, 'Northrop Frye: Criticism as Myth', in Krieger, op.cit., p.75. ff.

## CHAPTER II : APPROACH THROUGH LITERARY BIOGRAPHY

"For in my nature I quested for beauty,  
but God, God hath sent me to sea for pearls."

Christopher Smart, 'Jubilate Agno'.

"My autobiography is Briggflatts -- there's nothing else worth speaking aloud." Thus Bunting at the start of the conversations taped by Jonathan Williams which comprise the most detailed account we have had of his life. In a sense, and despite the interesting variety of that life, Bunting is quite correct. To paraphrase G. Wilson Knight on 'The Prelude':<sup>1</sup> were it not for Bunting's poetry we should not trouble about his life: therefore his life as here reflected by his poetry exists in its own right; and detailed theses concerning the sincerity of Bunting's self-examination in 'Briggflatts' will lead to a morass of insoluble problems.

Yet the life was lived, ruffling the surface flow of the verse lightly enough it often seems; yet as with hidden snags on Twain's Mississippi river bed, slight signs need watching, are vital for a safe passage.

And questions do persist beyond the full close of 'Briggflatts' -- nor are they quirked by its enigmatic Coda. Exactly what does happen between the poet and the young girl of his memory in the present, what was the relationship in the past, and does the final "uninterrupted night" propose any future? What of the details selected for inclusion in this "autobiography" after the relative clarity of Section I of the poem: as vestiges of a creative life lived, as he says in the Preface to his Collected Poems, "over forty years and four continents" do they amount to more than fragments shored against ruin, the Beatrice figure ousting all other relationships from place, the "Wives 2 (not

simultaneous); children 5 (ditto)" <sup>2</sup> now confined, on the first publication of 'Briggflatts', to an ironic afterword? There we read that "War, poverty and love oppressed and illuminated him": these are Bunting's themes, yet some readers have found more oppression than illumination from his compressed expression of them.

It is my final purpose to show that 'Briggflatts' does indeed tell us enough, offering a compact exposition of the central issues of the poet's life. Something may be gained, however, by an examination of the life outside the poems, not so much because it has been interesting and various but in order that central issues may be brought into focus when viewed in their proper settings of time and place. In the process some answers emerge to some at least of the unanswered questions posed by the poetry.

With twenty such questions I had come to visit Basil Bunting in September 1973. I left with five times that number unanswered after four hours of talk which mingled courtesy and challenge in an unnerving way.

He was smaller than I had imagined, with a self-composure that suggested resilient strength beneath an urbane and frail exterior. He did indeed possess "a pair of lively and remarkably pointed eyebrows of a sort that are often associated with wise and witty elder poets, but in fact, are very rarely seen on anyone," <sup>3</sup> as well as a malodorous poodle.

He was, I think, the most awesome person I have ever met, beginning the interview by comparing successful poems to the Hotchkiss machine gun which he had used during the Second World War in their unfussy and uncluttered mechanism, and in their accuracy. He sat with his back to the window, so that as afternoon wore on his face was hidden in increasing dark; when he switched on his reading light it was directed

at my eyes. I was not surprised to hear he had worked with British Intelligence in Persia after the war. He spoke with gleeful satisfaction of the destruction of an early exercise, a villanelle discovered in an old trunk when moving house: skilful as anything in Dowson or Dobson, it had been "consigned to the waste-paper basket for which it had originally been destined." He seemed determined to leave uncovered only those tracks he chose.

The conversation began with literature: he recommended Horace and Darwin for style; David Jones alone among modern English poets, and Hugh MacDiarmid, a friend only recently made, although their careers had in many ways run parallel; Ezra Pound had published too much; Dickens was a greater artist than Shakespeare in that the latter always took two or three stabs at meaning in a series of metaphors, thus weakening the effect; he had known James Joyce in Paris in the twenties, and had told him that Ulysses was the most amusing book he had ever read, and Joyce seemed well pleased with that notice.

We talked of politics, of the Arab-Israeli conflict then at its height, and he regretted the British ignorance of the Arab mind and character at the original negotiations for the establishment of Israel. He remembered with evident enthusiasm his war-time career on various fronts, particularly one convoy of trucks, carrying ammunitions for the Eighth Army, with which he had travelled from Persia to North Africa, an incident which had provided material for the final section of 'The Spoils' - a section which, revised in difficult circumstances due to the criticism of Louis Zukofsky, he still regarded as flawed. He would not speak of his experiences in prison as a conscientious objector during World War One.

Looking back on this visit, I remember best the sense of contradictory qualities: the proud comparison he made between his own

and Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetry, in suggesting that he had always been confident that his work would finally be recognised, went with a deep regret, I should say grief, for work undone - an abandoned Sonata for the son of his first marriage who died of meningitis at the age of 15, and the still unfinished 'A New Moon'. The complaint of the sudden onset of tiredness that old age brings was coupled with an ability to rise early each day to write (originally learned in order to avoid the heat of the Persian sun) - and not without advantage: he offered a dawn vision of a girl walking down naked to the river to swim, seen during a recent visit to a progressive private school: ("Apparently there is a thirst among sixth forms to know something of my poetry." <sup>4</sup>). The tales of poverty sorted ill with central heating, Persian carpets and the caravan at the gate, his atheism with his love and knowledge of church architecture, his anarchism with a wife who was "a mainstay of the local tennis club." At dinner, while the poet had discoursed on Swinburne out of print and Coverdale's Bible, the general talk had been of Wimbledon on television. And lest by this account Bunting seem pretentious, I must not omit to mention his kindness and generosity to me on this and on a subsequent occasion, as well as his ready humour.

Thus I left him with a feeling of perplexity. In his tidy garden I noticed lunaria annua, honesty or moonwort, valued for its decorative silver moons. A superstition, formerly widespread, held that people who grew honesty in their gardens were trustworthy, but I was not sure. As I shook hands it seemed I touched the last survivor of a great generation: Hulme, Eliot, Pound, Joyce. His face over the garden gate was inscrutable as a moon; he leaned there like an old farmer as I drove away.

So much for first impressions. I suspect now that Bunting reconciles his distaste for literary biography which he finds "almost

always impertinent" <sup>5</sup> with the generous conversation that courtesy demands by retelling or retailing to all and sundry the same information. The comparison between poem and machine gun appears in a letter to Zukofsky, <sup>6</sup> as does the comment on Shakespeare, <sup>7</sup> In a recent interview he "recommends Ulysses as one of the most entertaining books ever written", <sup>8</sup> as well as Darwin on style. And so forth. Thus Bunting was perfectly truthful in his early warning to me:

"I have nothing new to say to anyone. But you are welcome to come and talk".

The man remains hidden behind the poetic life and the poems are really all we have to go on finally.

This may be particularly perplexing for those who mingle, or confuse, art and life. Jane Kramer was present at an interesting conversation between Bunting and a rather puzzled Allen Ginsberg after a poetry reading at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in the winter of 1967. Ginsberg suggested that a record of the Paris and Rapallo scene, where Bunting was with Pound in the twenties and early thirties, might be useful: to which Bunting replied,

"No, no, - that sort of thing doesn't last. And I'm not interested in it for poetry . . . . I'd actually be happy if nothing remained of my life after I died".

"Not even the poems?"

Bunting smiled, "Why not?"

The piqued tones of Ginsberg, one imagines, must have amused Bunting:

"All along I thought you were destroying everything because of some perfect, objective hard principle, - like you were saying 'Let nothing remain but the works themselves' - and here it's really because you think you're not interesting. It's just some big ego problem. What kind of objectivity is that?" <sup>9</sup>

This is amusing not only because of Ginsberg's attribution of "some big ego problem" to Bunting's attitude rather than his own, but because of his failure to detect the irony or bluff in Bunting's expression: for of course it matters to him deeply whether his poems survive or not



(one sometimes thinks that it is all that matters) and he is convinced they will: "After a while ... I became confident that my poems wouldn't be allowed to perish. Someone would collect them sooner or later".<sup>10</sup> But certain aspects of his varied experience of life and a cast of mind perhaps innate, perhaps the result of early education, have borne in upon him no false optimism regarding the perishable qualities of human flesh:

In the grave's slot  
he lies. We rot.

The artist is akin to the mason: his work is permanent, mocking time and circumstance,

stone white as cheese  
jeers at the dale.

(C.P., p.53)

This is not a new idea - Bunting has never had much faith in "new" ideas ("most of them were repeatedly expounded, B.C. something, by philosophers who had not the fortunate inspiration to call them 'New' ")<sup>11</sup> - but it explains why he has no time for irrelevant or misleading concentration on the life rather than the work. Thus the lively conversation on Bunting's life and times (again the Joyce incident recurs) gratefully recorded by Allan Waters for Glasgow University Magazine (Volume 80, number 3) was followed by a glum retraction in the next issue at the request of the poet, irate at the disproportionate emphasis on biographical detail.

Nevertheless Bunting "will allow attention to be called to the place and date of his birth".<sup>12</sup> He was born in Newcastle, Northumberland on March 1, 1900, he tells us in Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal "amid rejoicings for the relief of Ladysmith during the Boer War". It is a date which might place him, perhaps, as the last of the last Romantics: his early tastes in verse were certainly formed on nineteenth century

poets, and his description of the poet's task, "Poetry is seeking to make not meaning but beauty", <sup>13</sup> is likely to strike us at first as oddly old-fashioned. His attitudes and tastes too have in some cases changed remarkably little: we find him, for example, speaking favourably in 1932 of Yeats' early poetry (apropos of Pound's): "it's beauty of rhythmic texture, not unakin to early Yeats, was in itself pleasing", <sup>14</sup> and a similar view is expressed in 'Yeats Recollected', the text of a talk given to the Yeats Summer School at Sligo in 1973. <sup>15</sup>

The rhythmic texture of some of his own early poems, with their rich and skilful rhyming, itself a product of a year's prentice work on villanelles and rondeaux (all since destroyed), as in Odes 3, 4 and 10 (C.P., pp.89, 90, 96), also bears witness to his nineteenth century inheritance, and the fin-de-siècle fondness for those forms.

Yet the place of his birth sets up a contradictory tension: beauty is not permitted to luxuriate but is honed to a northern sparseness and sparseness, a landscape of

herring gull, surf and the text carved by waves  
on the skerry.

(C.P., p.65)

His birthplace, as R.S. Woof points out, <sup>16</sup> is properly not Northumberland but Northumbria, an ancient kingdom whose attitudes and history, as will be seen, permeate Bunting's work. Even the speech sounds of the region play their part, for "Southrons would maul the music of many lines in Briggflatts" (C.P., p.156).

Bunting was born into reasonably comfortable middle-class circumstances, so far as we can tell from Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal. The spoon in his mouth was not silver, and tended to be full of tapioca pudding, nevertheless his father's house in the then fashionable Scotswood district of Newcastle, with housemaid and governess, provided a secure childhood for young Bunting and his sister. His father was a

doctor, "a rather remarkable one", whose researches in histology (he later worked in the pioneering field of radiology) won him a gold medal at Edinburgh University but little financial return: they suggest, however, an independent and enquiring cast of mind which his son inherited. Nor was he a narrow specialist - he would read the less recondite parts of Wordsworth to his children, and was also "a man with much feeling for hill country and for walking".

After day nursery school, Bunting attended Newcastle Royal Grammar School for a year or so, and then went away to a Quaker boarding school at Ackworth in the West Riding of Yorkshire. By his own account "the chief permanent influence of Ackworth, besides instilling the general Quaker attitude, was the enormous amount of Bible that had to be read. Every morning you had to get a large lump of the Bible by heart before breakfast. At breakfast the Bible was read to you. At tea-time, after tea, the Bible was read to you again. And on Sundays there were very large lumps of the Bible, besides Scripture lessons in between".

Some effects on Bunting's poetry of this close acquaintance with the rhythms and forms of the Bible will be discussed later. At this point in his life, the most striking result of the Quaker influence at home and school (after Ackworth he went to another Quaker public school at Leighton Park in Berkshire) was his decision on leaving school at seventeen and a half to refuse service in the First World War. As a conscientious objector, he was arrested in Newcastle, almost on his eighteenth birthday (March 1, 1918) and spent a painful period in jail.

Although Bunting now wryly puts Wormwood Scrubs alongside Ackworth and Leighton Park as a place where he was educated, in his entry for Who's Who, the effect of this incarceration on the spirit and person of the high principled young poet must have cut deep, all the more so since, despite the Quaker atmosphere of his home, his family did not support

his stand. Both moral and physical strength were needed.

We now know something of the hardships suffered by conscientious objectors such as Bunting. <sup>17</sup>

The standard sentence became 112 days' hard labour, reduced from an original sentence of two years.... But under the 'cat and mouse' procedure originally formulated to deal with suffragette agitation, the end of each sentence became the prelude to a new one. The released prisoner was again called up, again arrested as a deserter, again handed over to the Army...

During the first month of confinement conditions were doubly hard. Prison work was done in isolation in the cell. The diet was minimal, expressly designed to strip a prisoner of fat and surplus energy resources. The bed consisted of a bare wooden plank... Not a single visit or letter or any communication from the world outside was allowed during the first two months....

C.O.s were confined in cells... often no more than 11ft. by 7ft. Windows, where the cells were built against external walls, were small and high. The prisoner had to stand on his stool to see through them - and this was forbidden. Often they were of frosted glass. Prisons in areas troubled by Zeppelin raids had their cell windows blacked out with paint... Every cell door had an elaborate lock and a warder's peep-hole.

The close confinement of the cell could mean torture in the summer months. One prisoner wrote:

'I have seen a man go raving mad in the prison after being shut up in a warm cell from four o'clock in the afternoon until six o'clock next morning.'

Cold spells in winter provided the reverse hardship....

The most arduous of all prison regulations was the notorious 'silence rule'. Prisoners at that time were not allowed any conversation at all, either among themselves or with warders...

Treatment was harsh, often brutal: mental and physical anguish broke many men. During his first night at the Scrubs, in June 1917, a Leeds Quaker, Ernest England, was taken ill. "Repeated requests for a chamber pot were refused, and eventually England made use of the floor. The following morning the warder, with a brutality beyond either description or comprehension, took England by the scruff of his neck and buried his face in his excrement. For seventeen weeks he was ill and unable to work".

Bunting's reticence enables us to take from this period of his life only the lines from 'Villon' which, we now see, derive from personal rather than literary experience, from fellow suffering with,

rather than imitation of, the French poet, as he refers to the darkness, cold and discomfort of his cell, to the psychological effect of the silence rule, and the threat of madness:

In the dark in fetters  
 on bended elbows I supported my weak back  
 hulloing to muffled walls blank again  
 unresonant. It was gone, is silent, is always silent.  
 .....  
 only bricks and bleak black cement and bricks,  
 only the military tread and the snap of the locks.  
 Mine was a threeplank bed whereon  
 I lay and cursed the weary sun.  
 They took away the prison clothes  
 and on the frosty nights I froze.  
 I had a Bible where I read  
 that Jesus came to raise the dead -  
 I kept myself from going mad  
 by singing an old bawdy ballad  
 and birds sang on my windowsill  
 and tortured me till I was ill...

(C.P., pp. 13, 15)

At the signing of the Armistice in November 1918, there remained in prison some 1500 conscientious objectors. There was hostility in the popular press to the release of any of these before Army demobilisation had been completed, and those in Bunting's position, who had recently reached eighteen and had been in prison less than twenty months, were only released between May and August 1919. This was a political decision, and so Ezra Pound was only partly correct when he wrote to Rabindranath Tagore:

"I think Bunting is about the only man who did six months jail as a conscientious objector during the armistice i.e. after the war was over, on principle that if there was a war he wouldn't go. (Quaker). <sup>18</sup>

When Bunting emerged from prison, everything was altered: all personal sense of continuity seems to have been lost for him and not for thirty years would he return for longer than short periods to his native Northumberland, but wandered through the changed cities of Europe entre deux guerres - London, Berlin, Paris, Milan - as well as America of the

Depression years, reflecting in sardonic and fastidious verse the sterility of a shattered world, and often his own sterility too, as its uneasy citizen.

Before attempting to follow his tracks, it is as well to remember some shattering which he had himself effected, which does not appear in any of his accounts of his life except the most vital, 'Briggflatts'.

As a youth he had spent holidays at Briggflatts, a hamlet near Sedburgh in the West Riding of Yorkshire which had a strong Quaker tradition (it has the second oldest meeting house in England, now maintained by the Society of Friends, Kendal). He stayed with his uncle, and on these holidays would help the local mason, smoothing stones and so forth, a task commemorated in the lines from the poem, "Fingers/ache on the rubbing stone".

With the mason's daughter, Peggy Greenbank, he broke the laws of that close community; more important, he broke the laws of that relationship, having determined that it held him back from the free exploration of life that the artist's role demanded (this, I take it, is the conflict outlined in 'Briggflatts' Section I). The break preyed on his mind for fifty years. One could scarcely have guessed it from his early poetry - although a strong sense of guilt is felt in such early works as Odes 2 and 10 (C.P., pp. 88, 96). The final expiation, however, did not come until the writing of 'Briggflatts'.

One other early influence should be noted. Bunting had an aunt who had retired from a career as a concert pianist to marry a farmer. Bunting from an early age would often listen to her play, Scarlatti being a favourite composer, whose sonatas, as we shall see, would later form the basis for the new form which Bunting felt that modern poetry lacked. The Newcastle Bach Choir (of which he was, I believe, a member) also figured in his early musical education.

After his release from prison, Bunting, with the encouragement of Sidney Webb (who had, with Ramsay MacDonald and James Maxton among others, signed the Labour Party's manifesto for the General Election of December 1918 which had called for release of conscientious objectors) entered the London School of Economics in 1920. While there he assisted Graham Wallas, a lecturer and a founder of the Fabian Society, with footnotes to a book presented to the Royal Commission on prison reform.

But economics bored him (although the subject has continued to provide poetic material) and in 1922 he left to tour Scandinavia and eventually reached Paris, where he dug ditches for a living and managed to make the acquaintance of the surrealist group (notably Jean Cassou, Philippe Soupault and Tristan Tzara<sup>19</sup>) and, more important for his later development, of Ezra Pound. With Pound's assistance he became sub-editor and secretary to Ford Madox Ford's Transatlantic Review, until he quarrelled with Ford and was succeeded by Ernest Hemingway.

Bunting left for Italy in January 1924 and there by chance again met Pound who had moved to Rapallo. Later he returned to London and made a meagre living, writing occasional articles, before being appointed music editor of The Outlook (a magazine somewhat akin to the present Spectator) a position which he held from October 1927 until 1928 when the magazine closed. After six months in a remote cottage in Northumberland and a short stay in Berlin - "the worst thing I ever did,"<sup>20</sup> bitterly recalled in 'Aus dem Zweiten Reich' - he settled at Rapallo.

After the publication of his first collection Redimiculum Matellarum (privately at Milan in March 1930) Bunting travelled in America, and was married there, but unable to make a living as a music reviewer, returned with his wife to Rapallo. In 1933 the cost of living forced him to move with his wife and daughter to the Canary Islands.

They subsisted there until leaving immediately before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and returning to London where his wife quit him and took their three children back to America. Bunting bought a sailing boat, and worked with the fishing fleet on the South Devon coast. After some more formal training in navigation at the Nelly Nautical Academy in Newcastle, he was for a while in America, captaining large schooners of the wealthy of New York and Los Angeles.

On the outbreak of the Second World War he enlisted in the R.A.F. and rose through the ranks to Squadron Leader, after working on various fronts on convoy protection vessels, as a drill instructor, interpreter, truck driver in the desert, and intelligence officer to a busy fighter squadron in the Adriatic.

After this involvement, Bunting was able to outline the merits of war:

"People....don't admit there may be merits in war, which is associated in their minds with the stupid slaughters of 1914-18... to the exclusion of all virtue except endurance. But resolution and effort can be gay instead of grim, and the death and ruin have had their importance exaggerated. That is not to deny their existence nor to advocate multiplying wars. But freedom from war, like freedom from poverty, can be pursued at the expense of things better worth preserving than peace and plenty, of which, I should say, the most important, and the most threatened, is personal autonomy". 21

The attitude of the fighting men in 'The Spoils' Section III, certainly, expresses the jauntiness and daring which Bunting values here, and the Note to the poem (C.P., p.156) underlines this idea. His wartime service was perhaps the most fulfilling period of Bunting's life in the opportunities it presented to blend passion, diverse experience, and intellect.

Service in the Intelligence and diplomatic services followed in Persia after the war, as Vice Consul in Isfahan in 1945 and later in the British Embassy in Tehran in 1947. By November of that year he had



abandoned diplomacy to work as foreign correspondent for The Times, a post he filled with some distinction (with only one year's interruption in 1950 as a correspondent in Italy) until expelled by the Persian leader, Mosadeqq, in April 1952.

There followed a bitter period of poverty in Northumberland when Bunting supported his second wife, whom he had married in Persia, and their son and daughter, by proofreading train timetables, seed catalogues and electoral registers, until he became sub-editor (financial page and football reports) on the Newcastle Evening Chronicle, a job he held until 1966.

In that year he was Visiting Professor at the University of Santa Barbara in California. In 1970 and 1971 he held similar posts at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, and at the University of Victoria, British Columbia. He was Poetry Fellow at the Universities of Durham and Newcastle, until his yearly contract was not renewed because of cutback in university expenditure. In 1972 he became President of the Poetry Society and in 1974 President of Northern Arts. An extensive reading tour in the United States was undertaken in the spring of 1976.

Bunting has obviously led, and sought, a varied life. One may choose to approach his poetry through literary biography although it is likely to be as diverse as its subject's life, and as uneven; moreover, one should always remember that his attitudes towards life can be judged from the poems alone, as G.S. Fraser judged them, writing in 1952 solely from the evidence of Poems 1950, to be "those of a man of wide culture, civilised restraint, a capacity for regret and passion. He has also a sense of humour, blowing the gaff, for instance, about the White Goddess, in a very irreverent treatment of the Attis theme .... His 'social awareness', also, has a wide human scope.... He knows books,

the world, and men; he can be sensitively ironic and also movingly direct.... He is personal, humane, various". 22

Even when biographical information is given, it may be tempting to concentrate on the sheer variety of the life yet ignore the important point that familiarity with a wide range of experience enabled Bunting to render in verse that concern with "the impression made <sup>by</sup> objects" which he has praised in Omar Khay<sup>y</sup>am. 23

Small details, too, from his life, glimpsed in their context can shed light on the rather austere and self-sufficient landscape of the poetry. From the information in Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal, for example, that Margaret de Silver, a wealthy American patroness gave Bunting a subsidy of £200 a year in 1928, and that he went up to a shepherd's cottage in the hills of Central Northumberland where he "learned a little about how they train sheepdogs", one's mind turns immediately to that precise observation of shepherds and dogs in the final section of 'Briggflatts', written down almost forty years later: a slow maturation of a patron's investment, yet the benefits are ours:

Shepherds follow the links,  
sweet turf studded with thrift;  
fell-born men of precise instep  
leading demure dogs  
from Tweed and Till and Teviotdale,  
with hair combed back from the muzzle,  
dogs from Redesdale and Coquetdale  
taught by Wilson or Telfer.  
Their teeth are white as birch,  
slow under black fringe  
of silent, accurate lips.

(C.P., p.69)

The chief justification for biographical study of Basil Bunting, however, is that it can lead us to an understanding of the unity of life and art which is of first importance in any view of this poet, if only because he has taken such pains to ignore it. His account in Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal of his experience of music in his youth, of the

Newcastle Bach Choir and the influence on him of its leader, Dr. Whitaker, of the discovery of Byrd's Great Service in Durham Cathedral at that time and its presentation, can be seen to have led to his early recommendation of "the music of Byrd and Dowland, so much more supple rhythmically than English poetry" as a model against the monotony of too many English poets, "the slaves rather than the masters of their metres",<sup>24</sup> and finally to an important aspect of the music of 'Briggflatts': "The music Bunting refers to for his imagery (Byrd, Monteverdi, 'Schoenberg's maze') suggests voice against voice, line against line, - madrigal and canon, not impressionistic sound painting".<sup>25</sup> We note too how the recollection of early suffering in 'Villon', of the conflict between poetry and prison, art and burial (in a cell, in a tomb) is resolved into a "voice": this is the "catalytic", the "factor that resolves/unnoted harmonies", and through steady concentration on what the human voice can be made to reach, Bunting has been able to extend his range of tones from the admitted immaturity of his early flights: "How can I sing with my love in my bosom?" (C.P., p.17)-to the later mastery of a

Flexible, unrepitative line  
to sing, not paint; sing, sing,  
laying the tune on the air,  
nimble and easy as a lizard,  
still and sudden as a gecko.

(C.P., pp. 56-57).

Just how he gets experience into this music is a subtle and complex question to which this dissertation attempts to give a variety of answers. Something is achieved by "the tune" of the words "on the air". Now "in all the best songs, those which mean most to us ... the tune is the medium and the medium is indeed the message. It takes us beyond the literal sense of the words and expresses the whole range of our emotions".<sup>26</sup>

In Bunting's lines above, this range is partly reached through rhythm: the contrast between the subtlety and sinuosity expressed through the clusterings of weak syllables in the first line and the certainty of the rightness of his method through the twin spondees of the second: "not paint; sing, sing". The slow definition of experience through craftsmanship is expressed through the dactylic feet of the third line, and the ability of life to reassert its variety in the breaking down of the dactylic pattern after the first foot of line four: "nimble and easy as a lizard". And the "tone" or "pitch" of these words plays its part, too: the flexibility and lightness which may be achieved by singing expressed through sharp and open 'i' and 'e' sounds, the heavier back vowels reserved for contrast (as in "sing, not paint", or the "sudden" movement of the gecko); and interplay of liquid and sibilant sounds throughout combines to express the delicacy of the procedure, with the sure touch of craftsmanship, perhaps, asserted by the precise dental 't' and 'd' sounds.

Such analysis quickly takes a maniacal air, and seems to hark back to the theory of the onomatopoeic origin of language, of which Gerard Manley Hopkins was so fond. Yet there is little doubt in my mind that some such tune is taking us beyond the literal sense of the words, touching our emotions in subtle and powerful ways. This is one way of getting experience into music; the other, more obvious way is by reference to or comparison with life. But if we examine the comparisons here,

nimble and easy as a lizard,  
still and sudden as a gecko

equally subtle reference must be made to aspects of the poet's physical and emotional life, with an even greater chance of misjudgment of emphasis than in the admittedly tentative analysis of the experience of sound and rhythm. Firstly I would wish to bring in here from

Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal Bunting's early experience of lizards in helping his father with his medical researches ("The house was sometimes full of lizards that had escaped from their box in the cellar") and the connection he makes between such scientific observation and poetry in a recent review of MacDiarmid's poetry.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, since this section of 'Briggflatts' deals with Bunting's travels in the 20's and 30's in Mediterranean lands and in the Canaries, the comparisons are apt, blending art and environment, but with a sense of nervousness or edginess which eventually issued in the dissatisfaction expressed in 'The Well of Lycopolis' which, he admits in Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal, "is about as gloomy a poem as anyone would want". Finally, and also apt to the stage of his poetic career covered by this section of 'Briggflatts', the title of the essay referred to above (note 24) should be remembered, and its subject matter. 'The Lion and the Lizard' opens with a comparison between Fitzgerald's translation of the Rubáiyát and Omar Khayyám's original, the former the lion, in his continuously "exalted tone" and cadence which lacks variety, the latter the lizard in a way pleasing to Bunting, in that his rhythm "is broken and colloquial or it dances or chatters as Fitzgerald's never does."

Thus in comparing his own method to the lizard's movement, Bunting brings briefly into focus many deeply felt experiences or beliefs from his past, though one must dig deep to find the foundations on which the lines so lightly stand. The danger of biographical study is always that it can lead to a too easy or simplistic linking of art and life. What at first sight might seem, for example, a spontaneous poem, "You leave" (C.P., p.113), apparently founded, from the date of writing (1935) on the incipient breakdown of Bunting's first marriage, is in fact a careful translation of a four line rubai of the Persian poet Hafez, which, as S.V.M. Forde has shown, (op.cit., pp.88-89) retains some fine

details of the original, although the lines were so carefully rearranged for rhetorical and rhythmical emphasis that it is placed with the poems rather than with the translations in the Collected Poems: as Bunting wrote to her, "if I'd thought there was very much of Hafez left in the product, I'd have put it with the other translations."

Some knowledge of the poet's life does enable us, however, to view with greater understanding and a degree of sympathy the occasional bitterness, elitism or seeming arrogance which must have lost him some support among readers and critics: in "A Statement", for example, we read that "the worst, most insidious charlatans fill chairs and fellowships at universities, write for the weeklies or work for the B.B.C. or the British Council or some other asylum for obsequious idlers." Nor is the tone of some of the notes to the Collected Poems very appealing. His poetic silence in the fifties and early sixties, and, I think, a consequent bitterness must have been mainly due to the menial and exhausting nature of his employment during those years. As late as 1966, that is, one year past retirement age, Bunting travelled into Newcastle every day to work on the Evening Chronicle. Hardly the environment for which he had wished at the start of his poetic career:

.... Alma Venus! trim my poetry  
with your grace; and give peace to write and read and think.

(C.P., p.135)

Nevertheless as an involvement with the world of men rather than of art, if one may state it so baldly, Bunting's life of action during and just after the war had a beneficial effect on the attitudes and images of the post-war poetry. Anthony Suter has noted that in 'The Spoils' "Bunting sees war as a means of regeneration, if only temporary, for modern society corrupted by money."<sup>28</sup> It also served to regenerate the poetry towards a broader maturity, wherein the allusions become cultural or societal rather than "merely" literary (aspects of Persian

architecture, Northumbrian history and dialect replacing Villon, Attis, Dante), and the tone calmer, free from the stridency or hysteria which mars some lines of 'Attis' or 'The Well of Lycopolis', themselves the product of a man without a social role, of no fixed abode and little gainful employment, a gnat in society's ear, but no more.

Those who meet or talk with Bunting, however, will find neither hysteria nor elitism, but rather, in Jonathan Williams's words, "a discreet and rigorously modest man, one with the sense of decorum, one of the 'old men with beautiful manners' that Pound speaks of." <sup>29</sup> Williams's book, indeed, offers in Bunting's reminiscences some fascinating clues to the psychology of his creative impulses: from his first conscious memory - of the poetry he wanted to write, "a genuine childhood desire, an instinct," when he was about five years old; to his father who "used to read poetry to us from the earliest years"; to the never-ending pursuit of excellence - "I wrote always, but had enough sense to destroy them all" - which is reflected in "Narciss, my numerous cancellations prefer" (C.P., p.97) or in 'Briggflatts',

It looks well on the page, but never  
well enough.

This attitude is part of the reason for the relatively small number of poems printed.

His father's interest in histology, involving the microscopic examination of the cell structure of animals, had, I think, a great influence on the precision of Bunting's observation and verbal effects in poetry. Had it not been for his poor vision, he told me, he would undoubtedly have entered his father's profession. In his review of Hugh MacDiarmid's poems, referred to above, he comments approvingly on the Scottish poet's almost scientific obsession with the facts of the

world we experience:

"... but not poetry alone, not books only, such as almost smothered much of his generation and mine, but

.... Constantly, I seek  
a poetry of facts...

... Pound and Zukofsky have sought a poetry of facts too, but neither, I think, has ever quite separated facts from metaphysics... Suckling poets should be fed on Darwin till they are filled with the elegance of things seen or heard or touched. Words cannot come near it, though they name things. Their elegance is part precision, more music..."

Bunting's poetry too is full of facts:

Secret, solitary, a spy, he gauges  
lines of a Flemish horse  
hauling beer, the angle, obtuse,  
a slut's blouse draws in her chest...

(C.P., p.55)

Hence the emphasis in this, at first sight, most literary of poets on the importance of experience: "You can't write about anything unless you've experienced it: you're either confused in your subject matter or else you get it wrong." <sup>30</sup> As Louis Zukofsky pointed out in the first (and only) review of Bunting's first book Redimiculum Matellarum, not only 'Villon' but all his poems "are grounded in an experience, though the accompanying tones of the words are their own experience." <sup>31</sup> This, the shortest and, I suppose, one of the best definitions of the value of Bunting's poetry, is not so simple as it at first appears: what does he mean, for example, by the "tones of the words?" Bunting, who emerges as a more forthright personality than his friend Zukofsky, less crabbed and mystical than the American in his comments on poetry, considered, when asked, that "tones" applies best to Persian, Arabic, or Alexandrian Greek rather than to the basic stress of English, and that Zukofsky had possibly been carried away to inaccuracy by the musical analogy. <sup>32</sup>

There is a mystical dimension to Bunting's personality, however. Recently he has commented on Quakerism as "a form of mysticism... I should say that mainly my view of things is an extremely pantheistic



one which finds no expression in any organised society except, perhaps to a limited extent but still a very useful extent, in the Society of Friends." <sup>33</sup> That the religious aspect has been hidden may have contributed, paradoxically, to the power (under stress) we experience in the seasonal and natural imagery that orders and structures 'Briggflatts': and the whole, as will be seen, does reflect a religious awareness and form - though compressed in a highly personal way. Kenneth Cox suggests that his compression of language "can be regarded as a compression of emotion, as of speech through compressed lips. Such speech not only rejects fripperies, it keeps as close as it can to the feeling which generated it and to the object it describes." <sup>34</sup>

A combination of this compression with the pursuit of excellence mentioned above has led to Bunting's characteristic method of composition - a ruthless cutting back of material in the interests of economy and precision. Of 'Briggflatts' Roger Guedalla in his Bibliography (p.30) notes that it was originally 15,000 lines long and was reduced to its final 700 lines over a long period of time. Another source, Jane Kramer, records Bunting's own estimation of an original 25,000 before he "threw the rest away" - much to Ginsberg's dismay: " 'Wasn't there anything of interest to you in all those lines? Like maybe revealing of you?' he asked. 'All I wanted to salvage were the good lines,' was the reply." <sup>35</sup>

This view has been a constant from the beginning of Bunting's career: the quotation from La Fontaine which ended Redimiculum Matellarum reveals his unease with length: "Bornons ici cette carriere / Les longs ouvrages me font puer." <sup>36</sup>

This is not a poetic cowardice, however, still less a "trying to repair uncertain verses by knocking out the connections." <sup>37</sup> Bunting, by virtue of his own skills and inclination as much as by his friendship

with Ezra Pound ("It wasn't a question of absorbing a man and then reproducing. It was a question of finding a man whose thoughts were working on parallel lines who happened to be senior. But I think both Zukofsky and myself would have got exactly where we are, not exactly but in the main, without Pound and Eliot")<sup>38</sup> was in the mainstream of that renewal of poetic language and forms which took place in the early decades of the twentieth century and, as Kenneth Cox has pointed out, in "presenting himself to the world through the medium of a language renewed in this way a writer compels himself to examine himself and cannot, it seems (the mechanism is obscure), perform the operation of stripping and reassembly without some moral discipline. There emerges in the end not only a spareness but also a purity of line."<sup>39</sup> Part of the power of 'Villon' must surely derive from the binding together of theme (which is, indeed, purity of line) and subject matter, the moral disciplines of aesthetic exploration and religious protest.

Revision and translation are kinds of stripping and reassembly in Bunting's poetic method, but, as Cox recognises in 'The Aesthetic of Basil Bunting' (p.26), it is the "fascination exercised by some incidental aspect of the physical world [that] constitutes the tenuous but unexpectedly solid foundation of the art." Examples are plentiful, the fascination such that the aspects are seen and heard and felt through rhythm and sound:

... there are no dancers, no somersaulters now,  
only bricks and bleak black cement and bricks,  
only the military bread and the snap of the locks.

(C.P., p.15)

Or again, with cunning use of sibilant and nasal to convey the sound and, almost, the texture and taste of the experience:

A gassy fizzling spun from among the cinders.  
The air, an emulsion of some unnameable oil,  
greased our napes.

(C.P., p.30)

Cox notes that this cultivation of the senses has two extraneous consequences of some importance: firstly, "by progressively increasing the definition of the verbal record," Bunting's expression "drives the language to its primal sources, till it draws upon the qualities that bind words to things" (not, I think, the influence of Pound's theories of the Chinese written character, but an example of the parallel development Bunting mentions); and secondly, by directing the poet's mind and absorbing his attention such observations "act as a preservative against propaganda of all persuasions." The elementary perception, in Bunting's words, "is to find some thing, or series of things, which mentioned, stated, so forth, will produce in the reader the state of mind which...rhetoric will not produce." <sup>40</sup> I am not sure to what extent Pound's parallel method has preserved him from propaganda, but Bunting is notably less politically dogmatic than he, or has possessed the independence of mind to resist his influence more stoutly than some: his only directly political poem, 'They say Etna', printed in Poems 1950, was withdrawn from Loquitur (1965).

In a letter to Zukofsky, to be sure, Bunting is not above a little propaganda on behalf of the eastern attitude towards the senses:

We need sensuality because without it we stumble into the ways of hollering he-man Hemingway sentimentality, or else the medical textbook school which forces itself unwillingly to admit, item by item, what is really half our life. (The last I expressed a dislike for in 'Lycopolis'). <sup>41</sup>

In the poetry itself, however, he is able to effect a balance. The final movement of 'The Spoils' combines both eastern and western attitudes in a war setting which involves both cultures. The theatre of war shifts from the Middle East to the North in the final lines, yet something essential of the east remains: the attitudes towards life and death already explored through the different voices of the two previous sections

(briefly, life as a hard journey best undertaken with little impedimenta in Section I; and life redeemed, made durable by the works of civilisation, the mosque its prime symbol, in Section II) now blend, in a way which the persona, soldier and artist, finds fully acceptable, in the image of the dangerous convoy which yet makes a garden of the seas it moves through, in the harsh struggle to maintain a civilisation and its cities:

Cold northern clear sea-gardens  
between Lofoten and Spitzbergen,  
as good a grave as any, earth or water.

(C.P., p.48)

This balance in the poetry reflects a sense of balance, confidence, rightness, which seems to have resulted from Bunting's contact with Islamic society. The claim of Islam to unite spiritual and temporal aspects of life, regulating not only the religious relationship with God but human relations in society, too, through the doctrine of social service and the ideal of a spiritual democracy or community of the faithful, may well have been attractive and familiar to one brought up in the Society of Friends. Although Bunting had by then, I think, become an atheist, he had not therefore ceased to value the world of the spirit, and the Islamic view that, since God is beautiful, the more beautiful a thing is the closer it approaches to reality, might well have created the larger context he needed for his own ideal of poetic beauty than nineteenth century aestheticism and symbolism, or twentieth century objectivism. Here an abstract art was preferred, one which corresponded to the spaces of the spirit; unfettered by realism, the spirit could wander as freely as the nomad in the desert.

Although Bunting's stress on facts may seem opposed to such abstraction, the structure of his poems is architectural and abstract. The idea of architecture plays a central part in 'The Spoils' through

the imagery of the mosque, and one could say that, just as the feminine principle of growth is expressed through the subtle rhythms of wind and wave which form the decorative motifs on the masculine order of the mosque walls and domes, so Bunting is able to unite these twin principles in the delicate growth of imagery and rhythm through the poem, contained by the order of theme and counter theme within and between its sections.

It could justly be argued that Bunting had used this method from the start: but what was different and stirring now was that it was no longer the experimental method of a poet working almost in isolation, but the ordering principle which governed a whole society and to which all men responded. Where Bunting had valued the spoken word, for Muslims the highest art was the spoken word - as a reflection of the creative Word - and the supple grace of their calligraphy, the noblest of the arts, was an attempt to render that value visible. Where Bunting had lived a life which alternated city life with wandering in no clearly organised way, here he encountered in a vital form the tension between the twin poles of Islamic civilisation, the nomad and the city - the nomads bringing fresh energies and the capacity for renewal, the cities providing stability and continuity, the home of learning and of arts and crafts. Bunting made of this tension the contrast of themes between Sections I and II of 'The Spoils'. That the Hebrew peoples partake of this tension enabled him, further, to bring his early knowledge and religious experience into play.

This sense of structure present differentiates Bunting's poetry in a fundamental way from the innumerable variations of the arabesque, which is the typical expression of Islamic art.<sup>42</sup> But one might ask whether this structure is clearly enough in evidence to prevent us feeling as we read that here is a poetry which comes close to the ambiguity and oscillation of style (a weaving between wordly, divine and

political levels) which is part of the attraction of Persian poetry: on what level(s) are we to take the opening of Section III of 'Briggflatts', for example?

This oscillation also makes Persian poetry difficult to translate. It must be admitted that most of Bunting's translations not included in Collected Poems seem now stilted or dated in expression. 43

In January 1938 Pound wrote to Otto Bird:

Bunt'n gone off on Persian, but don't seem to do anything but Firdusi, whom he can't put into English that is of any interest. More fault of subject matter than of anything else in isolation. 44

In the Persian tradition, each verse of poetry should be unique, valued for its own sake, and seeming lack of logic in the sequence was held a virtue. There is something of this in Bunting's own method; and to some of his lines the precept about Persian art might conceivably be applied: "their wings are too heavy with beauty." For the most part, however, they approximate rather to the interweaving of melodic lines which form the basis of Persian music - highly subtle variations on a comparatively simple given subject or theme. This music too finds its place in 'The Spoils':

Flute,  
shade dimples under chenars  
breath of Naystani chases and traces  
as a pair of gods might dodge and tag between stars.  
Taj is to sing, Taj,  
when tar and drum  
come to their silence, slow,  
clear, rich as though  
he had cadence and phrase from Hafez.

(C.P., pp.42-43)

But the enduring value of the encounter with Persian culture extends beyond individual lines or images. Like other poets of this century Bunting has sought in his poetry to establish or remake some "eternal" structure on earth. What Pound aimed for in his vision of the

good society and in the Dantesque imagery of the Cantos; what Eliot found in High Church and Royalism; what Yeats enjoyed by day through the custom and ceremony of the Irish great houses and by night through the cosmology of his messengers; what MacDiarmid wrested from Lenin and from stone (and latterly from language itself) - Bunting discovered in the spiritual democracy of Islam, where every aspect of life - social conduct, political life, architecture and poetry - was infused by a single vision and code. Returning to England, it might be said, he attempted to do likewise for his own north country in 'Briggflatts', where language, history, personal life and geography take on a symbolic and quasi-religious unity. Whereas Yeats sailed to Byzantium, so to speak, Bunting sailed back.

Persia and war brought a sense of wholeness, then, but Bunting's poetic attitudes and themes are remarkably of a piece when viewed apart from the particularity and diversity of the objects that express them. Victoria Forde's summation of the themes of 'Chomei at Toyama' - "Awareness of the brevity of life, the beauty of nature and art, the vagaries of fortune, the instability of men, - man's acceptance of all of this in view of the inevitability of death,"<sup>45</sup> could be applied equally to 'The Spoils' as well as to 'Villon' and 'Briggflatts'.

I prefer to restrict his themes more simply to the great lyric themes of Love and Death, with the inclusion of a third, Art. Bunting has, as will be seen, a fondness for the products of the great age of English lyric writing (c. 1560-1620) with their lack of any sense of a particular man writing out of an individual personality. "This lack of personal flavour was due largely, not to any theories that the lyric should be impersonal but to the discipline imposed on it by music," C. Day Lewis has suggested.<sup>46</sup> While he perhaps underestimated for the sake of his argument the force of contemporary artistic theory on such

impersonal practice, we take his point that with most Elizabethan and Jacobean lyrics what we hear is not a "unique human being but Everyman singing through him." The chosen discipline of music has certainly imposed upon Bunting a rather personal impersonality of stance; and he has taken a generalized attitude to his few selected themes.

Such selection and impersonality, in my opinion, has not weakened but rather strengthened his impact - certainly in the performance of his own work. Hearing him for the first time I was reminded of Willa Muir's description of the ballad singer, Jeannie Robertson, in Living with Ballads (1965):

"She is merely the vehicle through which flows a remarkable sense of duration, almost of inevitable ceremony and ritual. The slow build-up works on one's feelings well beneath the level of consciousness. Behind the words and the tune lie spaces of silence in which one feels the presence of mysteries." 47

It is a description which in turn reminds one of Bunting's own description in "A Statement" of the "meaning" of poetry which "lies in the relation to one another of lines and patterns of sound, perhaps harmonious, perhaps contrasting and clashing, which the hearer feels rather than understands; lines of sound drawn in the air which stir deep emotions which have not even a name in prose."

Such a stress on permanent values and themes should not blind us, however, to the growing maturity or equanimity apparent in the later poetry, seen, for example, in the choice of the ode 'Eheu Fugaces, Postume Postume' <sup>48</sup> recently translated from Horace, (Odes, Book II, XIV), where a tone of mature and urbane acceptance of death replaces the tetchy persona "on tenterhooks" in the early translation of Ode XIII (C.P., p.136):

For nothing we keep out of war  
or from screaming spindrift  
or wrap ourselves against autumn  
for nothing, seeing



we must stare at that dark, slow  
 drift and watch the damned  
 toil while all they build  
 tumbles back on them. 49

Images of death recur throughout Collected Poems, from the opening words of the preface - "A man who collects his poems screws together the boards of his coffin" - to the closing words of the final translation - "they were strangled in the same manner" (C.P., p.152) - with many varieties in between. Only the sea has

no variety of death,  
 is silent with the silence of a single note  
 (C.P., p.17)

and this because it represents for Bunting the final and inexpressible void beneath the actual on which the artist lives and works.

This concern with final things was with him from the start (the intensive Biblical studies during his Quaker schooling must have strongly influenced his world view), but it was his experience of the eastern philosophy of life which enabled him to reach a point where he could accept death, and write of

..... shores seldom silent  
 from which heart naked swam  
 out to the dear unintelligible ocean.  
 (C.P., p.47)

In a letter to Louis Zukofsky outlining the general intention behind 'The Spoils' he described that "characteristic of the Semitic peoples, which takes life as a journey (to Zion, to Jinnat) best performed with few impedimenta, and is indifferent to the furniture at the inn. . . . The advantage of the journey idea is that death becomes a familiar, almost a friend." 50

That "the journey idea" may be a controlling metaphor for the whole of Basil Bunting's poetry has not yet, so far as I know, been suggested, although undeveloped hints of it appear in certain comments by Anthony

Suter. In his review of Guedalla's bibliography he speaks of "the artistic and personal integrity of his sometimes anarchic voyage across the sea of life and literature." <sup>51</sup> Elsewhere he speaks of Bunting's idea of the poet "who is the lone visionary, traveller across uncharted wastes, a traveller who learns snatches of language in the ports where he passes, even forms attachments, but is forced by his fascination with the very forces he strives to conquer, to journey on, his only protection the integrity of his art." <sup>52</sup>

This is a stirring view, no doubt, although both inaccurate in its unwitting disparagement of the poet (Bunting does not learn "snatches" but can read in at least seven languages) and shortsighted besides in concentrating on the poet rather than on his poetry. If we link these statements with a third (again undeveloped) by the same writer, on the contradictory aspects of Bunting's life: "Cette vie n'est conséquente avec elle-même que par sa variété, sa façon d'être ouverte à l'expérience, et le fait qu'elle est consacrée à la poésie" <sup>53</sup> (the dedication to poetry being the important thing here) it becomes possible to suggest that the voyage is more structured than Suter's first quotation implies, and indeed that the poems themselves form stages of a quest through a literary cosmos.

While the theme of artistic creation is an important one for Bunting, as is apparant from the numerous references to it in the Collected Poems, for example in 'Villon' Section III, 'The Well of Lycopolis' Section III, and Odes 15 and 36, ("In fact I've probably said too much about art in the poems." <sup>54</sup>) art does not consist of writing merely narcissistic poems about writing poems. Rather the writing of the poem that will live becomes the objective of a life-long quest, only gradually discovered and recognised for what it is when

The sheets are gathered and bound,  
the volume indexed and shelved,  
dust on its marbled leaves.

It is this quest, literary as well as personal, - for of all fictions, as Northrop Frye reminds us in Anatomy of Criticism (p.57), "the marvellous journey is the one formula that is never exhausted" - which in the end gives to Bunting's work a final form, and a totality and largeness which it might not at first have been expected to attain. Poetry, in Arnold's view, was to take the place of religion, and the great epic of the poetic act has still to be written: yet perhaps Basil Bunting has approached this achievement in his life and art.

I trust that some basis of proof for this claim will emerge in the course of this study. I trust, too, that in the process will not be lost that odd and personal mixture of the sublime with the earthly, the mundane, sometimes the ridiculous, which is so marked a feature of Bunting's poetry, and is well caught in a poem from Robert Lowell's "Notebook" - '1930's' :

'Nature never will betray us,' the poet swore,  
choosing peeled staff, senility and psalter  
to scrounge Northumberland for the infinite....  
We burned the sun of the universal bottle,  
and summered on the shore front -. 55

While the third line aptly summarises Bunting's quest, the last two lines suggest his isolation, and the independence of trends or coteries that marked his literary development from the thirties to the late sixties.

His life may have been "anarchic", but the shape of Bunting's literary development is fairly clear - a concave curve or wave pattern, each peak connected with a centre of poetic change: the first, in the middle and late twenties and early thirties, with Ezra Pound at Paris and Rapallo, where the implications of modernism were still being explored and expressed; and the second with the resurgence of spoken and dialect poetry in the north of Britain in the late sixties and the seventies.

Between these peaks lies a trough of relative obscurity, certainly a dearth of reference to Bunting, although his work of preparation and creation went on.

In a quick summary of his poetic career, one must be careful not to omit the element of independence and personal integrity involved. While it is obvious that a slow learning of his craft took place in the twenties (from which survive in the Collected Poems some two poems per year) as an apprentice in the Eliot/Pound concern for the renewal of links between English literature and the larger European and world cultural traditions, it is also true that Bunting soon set himself apart from these two masters: by 1931 Eliot is satirised as the ineffectual eunuch of English poetry in 'Attis', and we have already noted Pound's complaint against Bunting's Persian interests.

We find, moreover, that time and again Bunting moves away from cultural centres; work on Transatlantic Review in Paris ended after a quarrel with Ford Madox Ford over Bunting's sense of his own worth; again, bailed out of Fleet Street by Margaret de Silver in 1928, he chose isolation in Northumberland rather than continue in London where he had been in contact with many aspects of the cultural life of the city, literary, musical and artistic.

A friend of this period particularly mentioned in Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal was Nina Hamnett who had been associated with Roger Fry's Omega Workshop in the early Bloomsbury days and who had lived for a time with Gaudier-Brzeska and was therefore in touch with the vorticist movement. (Some parallels between vorticist and objectivist theories are explored below, in Chapter V). Yet when he writes of her in The Outlook, Bunting praises a talent "robustly English, and not to be explained in terms taken from the precious vocabulary of Paris-cum-Bloomsbury aesthetics. "He values her humour, and also "the quality of

her drawing, firm, vigorous, and accurate, less decorative than forceful . . ." 56

In another article he dissociates himself from the prevailing ironic tone of his age: "this age has such a horror of giving itself away (which detestable state of funk it dissembles under the innocent names of modesty, irony and hatred of pretence - as though irony and modesty were not themselves ridiculous pretensions) . . . . Yet amplitude and nobility are heart's-demands. The sublime still towers magnificently over the merely beautiful." 57

Thus we see Bunting in the twenties setting himself apart from metropolitan sophistication and defining for himself the kind of art he wanted, at once simple, vigorous and sublime. It was a period also of self education in music and literature and it is not perhaps surprising that there followed a period of intense achievement in the early thirties, when he wrote 'Attis' (1931), 'Aus dem Zweiten Reich' (1931), 'The Well of Lycopolis' (1935), besides 'Chomei at Toyama' (1932) and a good number of Odes.

The achievement went unrecognised, however, since the temper of the times was now against him, and he himself against the temper of the times: "there is no poetry in England now," he wrote in 1932, "none with any relation to the life of the country, or of any considerable section of it." 58

This was a direct challenge to Spender, Day Lewis, MacNeice and Auden, and their "many sided Marxian wasteland" 59 now beginning to gain favour in England, although Bunting did except the last named of these poets to a certain extent by damning him with faint praise in the same article. Written not long after the completion of his early dialect poems 'Gin the Goodwife Stint' (C.P., p.100) and 'The Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer' (C.P., p.104), it is an interesting comment, prefiguring

'Briggflatts', on the need for a poetry rooted in its immediate environment. However, both criticism and poetry, written from Italy, suggest the very detachment Bunting complains of. Ironic detachment was his forte at this period: he shows his independence, for example, in the ironic stance of his article "The Roots of the Spanish Revolt",<sup>60</sup> in marked contrast to the sometimes naive political idealism of other writers of the time, as well as in his mockery of the "committed" poets as "the sleek, slick lads treading gingerly between the bed-pots" in 'The Well of Lycopolis'.

From such detachment two corollaries: lack of publication - one poem per year on average in Poetry from 1930 to 1934, and contributions in a few collections, Ezra Pound's Profile (1932) and Active Anthology (1933), Sherard Vines' Whips and Scorpions: Specimens of Modern Satiric Verse (1932) and Louis Zukofsky's An "Objectivists" Anthology (1932): secondly, and the more important corollary, Bunting's continued attempts in the early thirties to find a mean between detachment and involvement, the English and the international, the modern and the traditional.

Sometimes he achieves a balance within individual poems: in Ode 8, (C.P., p.94) for example, he unites Italy and England, pastoral tradition and modern society, and varieties of vocabulary, including dialect, in a pleasing way:

Shepherds away! They toll throngs to your solitude  
and their inquisitive harangue will disembody  
shames and delights, all private features of your mood,  
flay out your latencies, sieve your hopes, fray your shoddy.

In the early Sonatas, which, as we shall see, employ a dialectical procedure of theme and countertheme, Bunting seeks to attain a resolution in the final part reminiscent of what Keats called "stationing": after the progress of argument a union of process and stasis, characteristically found in a work of art: the "girls imagined by Mantegna" of 'Villon', the "muse" of 'Attis'; the "poetry" and

"plays" of 'Aus dem Zweiten Reich'; and the version of Dante, (more optimistic, in that the surface "sparkles and dances" rather than "bubbles and boils" <sup>61</sup>) which ends 'The Well of Lycopolis'.

But, also characteristically, in the pre-war Sonatas the sense of process is predominantly negative - a sideways shift, or nervous shuffle. Thus the "How can I sing" of 'Villon'; the "Nonnulla deest" of 'Attis'; the "Stillborn fecundities" of 'Aus dem Zweiten Reich'; and the rather agnostic simile of 'The Well of Lycopolis', "as though Styx were silvered by a wind from Heaven."

Indeed in reading these pre-war Sonatas one experiences an acute sense of "something missing," especially in comparison with the more confident and outgoing endings of 'The Spoils' and 'Briggflatts' where a true unification or "stationing" is attained. Perhaps it was a consciousness of this sense of impasse or failure of nerve which caused Bunting to abandon any serious and lengthy poetic statement for fifteen years. In 1941 he described his pre-war poems in these terms:

These tracings from a world that's dead  
take for my dust-smothered pyramid.  
Count the sharp study and long toil  
as pavements laid for worms to soil.

(C.P., p.119)

The hiatus of the war-time years and Bunting's active engagement in the Intelligence and Diplomatic services and in journalism in Persia immediately thereafter were conducive to experience but not to poetry. While he was in the East, Poems 1950 was published in Galveston, Texas, but not in England. Anthony Suter remarks that personal loyalty to Dallam Flynn (or Dallam Simpson as he was also known: he was a disciple of Ezra Pound and founded Four Pages in 1948 in order to disseminate Pound's economic and political theories) who had compiled the book, it is said at Pound's instigation, and refusal to make concessions over his preface that might have paid off economically, lost Bunting the chance

of being better known in England, "although it is perhaps doubtful whether an insular 1950's English public would have taken to his poetry." <sup>62</sup> There was, indeed, only one review of the book in England, that by G.S. Fraser in Nine 3, No. 8 (April 1952).

In conversation in 1974, Bunting contradicted the accounts of this affair with Faber and Faber (the publishers who refused Poems 1950) given by Suter and by Guedalla in his Bibliography (p.17) by saying that the book had been refused even before the preface was written which T.S. Eliot had wished to be removed. He thought that T.S. Eliot either did not regard his poetry highly enough to push for its publication as a director of the firm; or that possibly he had been piqued by Bunting's satire of him as the eunuch Attis in his poem of that name (although he rather doubted this, since Eliot was "a decent bloke" and they usually met for a meal whenever Bunting was in London); or that Eliot simply did not have enough power on the board of directors to secure publication.

There was, however, a gradual awakening of English interest in the 1950's in Pound's work, mainly due to Peter Russell who edited an anthology of essays on Pound published in 1950, and established the Pound Press at his bookshop in Tunbridge Wells to publish many of Pound's tracts, including a new addition of ABC of Economics. He further publicised Pound's ideas in his magazine Nine, to which Bunting contributed six poems from the Persian. <sup>63</sup>

Edward Lucie-Smith has suggested in British Poetry since 1945 <sup>64</sup> that there was a generally modernist inclination in English poetry in the sixties which escaped critical notice because of a decentralization of the poetic community and a tendency for young poets to reject academic values. New and predominantly international movements surfaced in provincial cities such as Liverpool, Belfast, Glasgow and Newcastle, near the last of which Bunting had settled at Wylam on the banks of the



River Tyne. A growth in the popularity of poetry among young people, and of poetry readings, together with a renewed interest in the work of David Jones which seems to Lucie-Smith to reflect "a revival of hermetic modernism," combined to create a public for The Spoils, First Book of Odes and Loquitur (1965), for Briggflatts (1966 and 1967) and for Collected Poems (1968 and 1970). Thus a final mastery of poetic skill and an age riper for the spoken emphasis in Bunting's poetry have led to his present reputation in his native land: fairly high in general but with some notable dissenters, and showing a slight tendency to decline since he has published little new poetry since 1966.

The hiatus between the two peaks of literary activity had various effects on Bunting's poetry. In the first place, he himself feels a distinct difference between his pre- and post-war poetry: "it was a different person who wrote the earlier poems - unfortunately his name was Bunting too." <sup>65</sup> It will be my concern to show literary links at least between these phases, however, and to demonstrate that they are parts of a single entity.

A second effect, according to Suter, is that in the later poetry "there is far less reliance on sources, at least for the reader's comprehension of the poems" and that this is partly due to the change in the public for poetry: "What one could expect in terms of erudition from one's audience, he claims, was far greater a generation ago than now. His present poetry, thus, has changed with the times in minimizing erudite reference." <sup>66</sup> One would be happier were Suter to draw a distinction between literary and other erudition here, the former having decreased, but the latter probably even more in evidence in the post-war poetry. The difference is that the erudition now often refers to an object or place or name ("Lindisfarne", "chenar", "Capella", "azan") which takes its position within the overall decorative design

of the poem, rather than obtrudes by its strangeness, incongruity or bookishness, as happens, for example, in these lines from "The Well of Lycopolis" and their attendant notes:

But none of their Bacchic impertinence,  
 medicinal stout nor portwine-cum-beef.  
 A dram of anaesthetic, brother.  
 I'm a British subject if I am a colonial . . .

(C.P., p.30)

In contrast, the god-bull in the Pasiphae incident of 'Briggflatts' Section II, for example, fits into a poetic pattern of which the "sweet tenor bull" of the poem's opening is only one strand, as well as into a larger mythical pattern. A growth of poetic skill, then, is as much responsible for the change in the post-war range of reference as concern for the audience.

A third effect of the years spent in the East, parallel to the effect we have noted of the Eastern philosophy of life on Bunting's themes, was the influence of Persian culture on his emphasis on the spoken word and the music of poetry. In 1967 he staged his reading at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, after the manner of the classical poets of Persia, enlisting Ginsberg's help to find a beautiful young girl to sit on a pillow at his feet and pour wine for him. The fact that music traditionally accompanied poetry in Persia must have confirmed him in his own views on poetry and performance.

But it was in a homelier, less exotic environment that Basil Bunting eventually attained prominence, by linking the sounds of poetry to a native sense. As Kenneth Cox points out (and critics such as Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong have also emphasised) "Experience entering by way of the ear is intimate and involving in a way sight is not. The hearer takes in the changing sounds of his immediate environment and his speech, being itself sound, moulds itself on the aural intake: my tongue is a curve in the ear, whereas sight is projected outside the self to things

of a different order".<sup>67</sup> In 'Briggflatts' the involving nature of a poetry meant to be read aloud is heightened not only by an increased musical or rhythmical skill on the poet's part but by its very subject matter, being "a poem of return, of recovery," with its celebration "of origins, of remote blood and ancestry, of a natal landscape."<sup>68</sup>

'The Spoils' had looked forward to this Northern landscape in its final lines but in the later poem the sense of place pervades the whole, not only in local imagery - Lindisfarne, Redesdale, Rawthey etc.- and in the use of dialect words from Bunting's country holidays of childhood- "lorry" for cart, "girdle" for griddle etc.- but also, as Herbert Read has remarked, on the dialectal strength of the poem "which partly depends upon a select vocabulary, Saxon in its roots, partly on a traditional pronunciation (broad, soft vowel sounds), partly on a crisp enunciation that seems to carve the syllables out of crystal rock, writhing lips and tongue with a gusto unfamiliar to slurred Southern speech:"<sup>69</sup>

Take no notice of tears;  
 let the stone to stand  
 over love laid aside lest  
 insufferable happiness impede  
 flight to Stainmore  
 to trace  
 lark, mallet,  
 becks, flocks  
 and axe knocks.

(C.P., p.54)

The stress on the local is not enough, I feel, to explain Bunting's wider popularity, the "Apotheosis" which was such a surprising feature of the English poetic scene in the late sixties. I am reminded, by the local sounds and by the imagery of carving and sculpting in those lines, of the following paragraph in Marshall McLuhan's The Gutenberg Galaxy:

Let us return to the space question as affected by Gutenberg. Everybody is familiar with the phrase, "the voices of silence." It is the traditional word for sculpture. . . . As the Gutenberg typography filled the world the human voice closed down. People began to read silently and passively as consumers. Architecture and sculpture dried up too. In literature only people from

backward oral areas had any resonance to inject into the language - the Yeatses, the Synges, the Joyces, Faulkners and Dylan Thomases. These themes are linked in the following paragraph by Le Corbusier, which makes plain why stone and water are inseparable . . . " 70

I omit the paragraph from Le Corbusier since it fails to make that fact plain to me, but other features of Bunting's poetry come into clearer focus: the preference for backward oral areas (Northumberland, Persia and "the plastic and audile-tactile world" of Italy); the importance of the human voice and the post-war movement away from the "literary" reference; the poet's art compared to the sculptor's or mason's in 'Villon' III, 'The Well of Lycopolis' II, and 'Briggflatts' I and IV; the symbolic architecture of 'The Spoils' and Ode 36 (C.P., p.121). A moment's reflection suggests that stone and water are indeed inseparable in his world. And one may easily move from here back to the "sculpturally contoured universalism of experience such as Dante's" 71 which had such a profound effect on Bunting, or forward to "the new electric technology, with its profound organic character. For the electric puts the mythic or collective dimension of human experience fully into the conscious wake-a-day world." 72

Here, like Northrop Frye, is another Toronto professor of English whose parade of learning and panache combine either to convince or to repel the reader, according, one might almost say, to taste. While one would hesitate to employ hypothesis (if McLuhan's work be regarded as hypothetical) to substantiate hypothesis, it is, I suspect, in some such response to larger than local cultural changes that the real cause of Bunting's recent success and influence is to be found. In any case, some of the images and ideas mentioned above will be explored later in further detail.

But it is fitting that this chapter should end on a personal and national note, with Edward Lucie-Smith's reminder that "Briggflatts" does, in fact, bring something distinctively English to the Pound

tradition, a highly-wrought deliberately musical quality which has both Marvell and Milton behind it." <sup>73</sup>

The comparison with Milton is interesting, and proceeds far beyond the quality of verse. Bunting's own notion throughout his life "was that somebody like Sir Walter Raleigh was such a person one ought to be; he did a mass variety of things, did them all well, some of them supremely well." <sup>74</sup> But in so far as his literary life is concerned, and this, I think, is the activity in which it could be said that he did "supremely well," the comparison with Milton is more apt for a variety of reasons.

One would imagine that as a religious poet Milton would have been an acceptable feature of study in Bunting's Quaker schooling: certainly his early poetry, especially, reveals a knowledge of Milton's verse, either in quotation, as in the epigraph to Ode 8, (C.P., p.94)

"Each fettered ghost slips to his several grave"  
from "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" xxvi ; or through ironic reference, such as the opening of 'Attis' Section II makes to Milton's Sonnet xxiii ; or glancing reference, as line 17 of 'On the New Forcers of Conscience Under the Long Parliament',

Clip your phylacteries, though baulk our ears  
may well be thought to have suggested both "baulk their hectoring" and, through its rhythm, "flay out your latencies ... fray your shoddy" in the Ode mentioned above. Elsewhere lines may simply strike one as Miltonic, as does this line, reminiscent of 'Lycidas', from the end of Section III of 'Briggflatts':

So he rose and led home silently through quiet woodland  
(C.P., p.64).

A more general similarity of approach to their art also links Bunting and Milton. There is the learning of their craft over a lengthy

period of time from similar foreign models - Pindar, Lucretius, Horace - often involving great exercise of memory. There is the Biblical influence on structure and theme. Both men suffered from weak vision; both were non-conformist; for both the great work was achieved in later years, only after experience of politics and war, and for both the period of postponement seems to have given strength. Interest in and knowledge of music and languages, a sense of ease in Italy and things Italian, a tremendous self-dedication to their art and, perhaps above all, a sense of architectural form, a constructive force, link the two poets. Like Milton, Bunting, as will be seen, is interested in new forms of epic structure. Both manage in language and style to combine simplicity and sublimity, and if Milton's elliptical syntax seems at odds with clarity, nevertheless Bunting, as we shall see, admires in Horace the use of periphrases or wrenching of word order for emphasis or point.

Oscar Wilde put a final point of similarity well: "When Milton became blind he composed, as everyone should compose, with the voice purely, and so the pipe reed of earlier days became that mighty many-stopped organ whose rich reverberant music has all the stateliness of Homeric verse, if it seeks not to have its swiftness...." 75

These are high points of comparison, and much as I admire Bunting's work I would not place him quite so high, but it is important to recognise the heights which he seeks to attain and inhabit, not dishonourably, and also to explore the consequences this has had for his poetry.

Thus rather than a (possible) view of Basil Bunting as a minor poet, diverse in form and recondite in image, an Ezra Pound manqué, lacking even an eccentric vision like his master's, literary biography seems to suggest, firstly, a unity of experience and theme as his central themes of love, death and art are rethought and reworked from poem to poem in the light of new experience in Italy, the Canaries, Persia and

Northumberland, and deepened in the process; secondly a steady growth of skill and maturity, from the young poet described by Yeats as "one of Ezra's more savage disciples" to an influential master in his own right; and thirdly, a pattern of exile and heightened return both in the life and in the art, as well as a vindication of his views on the spoken nature of poetry through a success founded at least partly on a native environment and a native speech.

Yet something will always escape the patterned mesh cast by the literary biographer. Bunting is still, even now, out of tune with his times, insofar as "the present revival of spoken poetry has on the whole favoured not Bunting's kind of poetry but the kind that conveys instant and obvious 'meaning' with little regard for 'beauty'." <sup>76</sup>

It is perhaps more difficult than Bunting suggests in 'A Statement' to distinguish the fraud from the poet when poetry is read aloud. Even he himself has been considered a fraud. <sup>77</sup> Some other critical approach may refute this charge.

NOTES TO CHAPTER II

1. G. Wilson Knight, The Starlit Dome: Studies in the Poetry of Vision (London, 1971), p.2.
2. Basil Bunting, Poetry, Vol. 107, No. 4 (January 1966), p.274.
3. Jane Kramer, Allen Ginsberg in America (New York, 1969), p.141.
4. Jonathan Williams, op.cit.
5. In a letter to the author, dated 1 September, 1973.
6. Letter dated 22 September 1941, and quoted in Victoria Forde, Music and Meaning in the Poetry of Basil Bunting, Doctoral Dissertation (AnnArbor, 1973), p.48.
7. "Shakespeare makes three or four casts at an object ..." 'The Lion and the Lizard', unpublished essay sent by Bunting to Zukofsky, May 1935. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.20.
8. Basil Bunting, The Listener Vol. 97, No. 2506, (28 April 1977) p.557.
9. Jane Kramer, op.cit., p.144.
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13. Basil Bunting, 'A Statement', Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal.
14. Basil Bunting, 'Mr Ezra Pound', The New English Weekly 1, No. 6 (26 May 1932), p.137.
15. Basil Bunting, Agenda 12, No. 2 (Summer 1974), pp.36-47.
16. R.S. Woof, 'Basil Bunting's Poetry', Stand 8, No. 2 (Newcastle, 1966) p.29.
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21. Basil Bunting to Louis Zukofsky, letter dated 19 April 1951. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.182.
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23. Basil Bunting, 'The Lion and the Lizard', (May 1935). Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.19.
24. Ibid., Forde, op.cit., p.18.
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26. J.W. Lambert, 'Schubert', The Sunday Times Magazine (London, 9 October 1977), p.17.
27. Basil Bunting, in a review of More Collected Poems and A Clyack-Sheaf by Hugh MacDiarmid, Agenda 8, Nos. 3-4, pp. 118-119.
28. Anthony Suter, 'Basil Bunting: Poet of Modern Times', Ariel Vol.3, No. 4 (University of Calgary, October 1972), p.31.
29. Jonathan Williams, op.cit., Note One.
30. Anthea Hall, 'Basil Bunting Explains How a Poet Works', Newcastle Journal (Newcastle, 17 July 1965), p.7.
31. Louis Zukofsky, '"London or Troy?" "Adest."' Poetry 38, No. 3 (June 1931), p.161.
32. Learned in conversation, 1 July 1974.
33. 'Basil Bunting', an interview in meantime No. one (Cambridge, April 1977), p.72.
34. Kenneth Cox, 'The Aesthetic of Basil Bunting', Agenda 4, Nos. 5-6 (Autumn, 1966), p.22.
35. Jane Kramer, op.cit., p.143.
36. La Fontaine, Fables, Book VI, Epilogue. Quoted in Guedalla, op.cit., p.15.
37. Peter Porter, a review of Collected Poems of Basil Bunting, London Magazine 9, No. 3 New Series (London, June 1969), p.78.
38. Basil Bunting, meantime, p.69.
39. Kenneth Cox, 'The Aesthetic of Basil Bunting', op.cit., p.21.
40. Basil Bunting, meantime, p.70.
41. Basil Bunting, in a letter dated 13 March 1951. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.162.

42. Information here from Encyclopaedia Britannica articles on Islamic arts, religion and peoples, and from numerous broadcasts and general articles.
43. Basil Bunting, 'Night is hard by, I am vexed and bothered by sleep', Nine, No. 4 (Vol. 2, No. 3, August 1950), p.218. 'You there, with my enemy, strolling down my street', and 'The thundercloud fills meadows with heavenly beauty' (omitted first stanza of 'Shall I sulk?', C.P., p.143), Nine, No. 11 (Vol. 4, No. 2, April 1956), pp.9-10. 'From "Faridun's Sons" by Firdusi', The Criterion, 15, No. 40 (April 1936), pp. 421-423.
44. The Letters of Ezra Pound, ed. D.D. Paige (London, 1951), p.400.
45. Victoria Forde, op.cit., p.110.
46. C. Day Lewis, The Lyric Impulse, (London, 1965), p.5.
47. Quoted ibid., p.54.
48. Basil Bunting, Agenda 8, Nos. 3-4 (Autumn/Winter, 1970), p.61.
49. Even this attitude is, sadly, grounded in experience in a pointed way: Bunting suffers from a type of cancer. Jonathan Williams writes, "The doctor has said / rodent ulcer / which might give a fit man of 70 / another 10 years." The Loco Loga daedalist in Situ (London, 1971), no pagination.
50. Letter dated 13 March 1951. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.152.
51. Anthony Suter, Agenda 11, Nos. 2-3 (Spring/Summer 1973), p.142.
52. Anthony Suter, 'The Sea in the Poetry of Basil Bunting', FORUM for Modern Language Studies (University of St. Andrews, July 1973), p.297.
53. Anthony Suter, op.cit. (above, note 19), p.122.
54. Basil Bunting, meantime, p.74.
55. In Robert Lowell's Poems. A Selection, ed. Jonathan Raban (London, 1976), p.128.
56. Basil Bunting, 'Some of Our Conquerors, XI: Nina Hamnett', The Outlook 60, No. 1547 (24 September 1927), p.407.
57. Basil Bunting, 'Gurrelieders', The Outlook 61, No. 1566 (4 February 1928), p.140.
58. Basil Bunting, 'English Poetry Today', Poetry 32, No. 5 (February 1932), p.264.
59. M.L. Rosenthal, The Modern Poets (New York, 1965), p.198.
60. Basil Bunting, 'The Roots of the Spanish Revolt', The Spectator No. 5639 (24 July 1936), p.138.
61. Inferno VII, 11.119-120.

62. Anthony Suter, review in op.cit. (above, note 51), p.140.
63. See above, note 43.
64. E. Lucie-Smith, British Poetry since 1945 (London, 1970), p.31.
65. Learned in conversation, 1 July 1974, when he expressed incomprehension about the feelings lying behind 'Attis: Or, Something Missing'.
66. Anthony Suter, 'Time and the Literary Past in the Poetry of Basil Bunting', Contemporary Literature (Autumn, 1971), p.518.
67. Kenneth Cox, 'A commentary on Basil Bunting's "Villon"', op.cit., p.61. Again we might note a balance achieved in the poem itself between the rival claims of sight and sound ("My tongue is a curve in the ear. Vision is lies") in the lines, "The Emperor with the Golden Hands / is still a word, a tint, a tone ..." C.P., p.15.
68. Herbert Read, 'Basil Bunting: Music or Meaning?', Agenda 4, Nos. 5-6 (Autumn 1966), p.7.
69. Ibid., p.6.
70. Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy (London, 1962), p.250.
71. Ibid., p.114.
72. Ibid., p.269.
73. E. Lucie-Smith, op.cit., p.56.
74. Basil Bunting, meantime, p.74.
75. Oscar Wilde, 'Intentions', The Critic as Artist. Quoted in Paradise Lost: Books I and II, ed. D. Shillan and O.S. Playfair (London, 1962), p.51.
76. Michael Hamburger, The Truth of Poetry (London, 1969), p.273.
77. W.E. Parkinson, in British Poetry since 1960, ed. Schmidt and Lindop (London, 1972), pp. 111-112.

### CHAPTER III : APPROACH THROUGH "SCHOLARSHIP"

"But any serious study of literature soon shows that the real difference between the original and the imitative poet is simply that the former is more profoundly imitative. Originality returns to the origins of literature ..."

Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism

Beneath the surface of Bunting's poetry there are such structures as life and experience have supplied, but these exist far less obviously for the reader than the diverse reference and complex ordering with which that surface is fashioned. The whole work seems to invite explication and the scholarly approach, an erudition sufficient unto the modernist doctus poeta and his cultural impedimenta, such has been the case with Ezra Pound. In Bunting's case that scholarship has either been lacking, or as I will suggest, has been of the wrong kind, and this has been at least in part a cause of the confusion of attitudes displayed towards his work.

Basil Bunting has been considered a charlatan, but this is only one among many divergent views. While Martin Dodsworth detects "an overall want of originality,"<sup>1</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid asserts that Bunting's poems are not only "the most important which have appeared in any form of the English language since T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land and such poems of W.B. Yeats as Sailing to Byzantium and The Second Coming," but that they are "without similarity to the work of any other contemporary poet."<sup>2</sup> While R.S. Woof finds "the musical carefulness [of 'Briggflatts'] constantly interesting and intricate,"<sup>3</sup> Peter Porter finds the same poem "the least instinctive of his poems in its music. The sound is harsh and rushed, the close rhymes crowd the short lines into bristling sentences."<sup>4</sup> And whereas Porter also finds the "Bunting persona" obtrusive - "a lecturer on history and society who is given to cryptic autobiographical sketches,

a prophet who has read a lot ..." <sup>5</sup> - this view is sharply contradicted by another reviewer who considers that a "simple dignity in the placement of words provides an equal light and clarity in Bunting's poems" so that the "central personality is reduced to a transparency through which the actions of the words can be seen." <sup>6</sup>

Such a list of divergence and contradiction could go on to include rhythm, diction, structure and total reputation: is Bunting an "eccentric," <sup>7</sup> interesting merely as a phenomenon of literary revival, or is he "the English poet of his generation with the most stringent and potent music - the man from whom we can learn the most" ? <sup>8</sup> A decision must be made in one or other direction, lest we fall into the unconscious confusion of one critic whose verdict on Collected Poems, expressed in the opening sentences of consecutive paragraphs, is that Bunting's work is both a "desert landscape" and "exotic fruit." <sup>9</sup>

The main cause of such divergent views has been expressed by Winifred Nowotny in The Language Poets Use, together with a possible way out of the impasse: "meaning and value in poems are the product of a whole array of elements, all having a potential of eloquence when, and only when, one element is set in discernible relation with another; therefore, a disagreement about the meaning or value of a poem is a disagreement about relationships and is likely to be interminable just so long as the relationships operating in a poem are by either or both parties to a dispute inaccurately estimated or described." <sup>10</sup>

It is possible, for example, that the pejorative description of Bunting's work quoted at the end of the paragraph before last may contain, paradoxically, a fair estimation of Bunting's artistic philosophy, mingling as it does a spare, harsh, dry objectivity - a desert world, if you will - with a disciplined or repressed romanticism and leanings towards sublimity which will, when the occasion demands, burst like a

grape upon the palate; but to prove this will demand a convincing demonstration of the poet's love of contrasts and employment of them as a structural principle, and of the formative influences on this artistic approach - an accurate description of the relationships operating in his poetry, in short.

If, on the evidence of 'Villon', Bunting was at twenty five "in technique ... among the most accomplished poets of his time," <sup>11</sup> one reason for the long neglect of, and divergent attitudes towards, his poetry has been simply a lack of accurate and close reading in the interval. Anthony Suter has clearly demonstrated, <sup>12</sup> for instance, the facile nature of the following view of Bunting's use of the ideogrammic technique of Ezra Pound:

In long poems such as 'Chomei at Toyama', Bunting sets down data from various sources, without comment and without transition in the hope that an 'ideogram' will result. In Pound's hands this technique is able to incorporate the quick poetic flash side by side with the matter-of-fact piece of data, but Bunting does not often succeed with the quick poetic flash. <sup>13</sup>

Not only may it be objected that the narrative ~~sc~~<sup>h</sup>ema of the poem prevents it from being truly ideogrammic in any real sense in the first place, and, further, that the "various sources" of which Goodwin speaks reduce themselves to one, the Hojoki of Kamo-no-chomei as filtered, translated and condensed by Bunting, but the quick poetic flash is everywhere apparent in Bunting's juxtapositions of material, Japanese and European:

Summer? Cuckoo's Follow, follow - to  
harvest Purgatory hill!  
Fall? The nightgrasshopper will  
shrill Fickle life!  
Snow will thicken on the doorstep,  
melt like a drift of sins.  
No friend to break silence,  
no one will be shocked if I neglect the rite.  
There's a Lent of commandments kept  
where there's no way to break them.

(C.P., p.80)

A deeper acquaintance with Bunting's poetry will further suggest that here are no mere "flashes" but a characteristic poetic structure, the seasonal sweep of the imagery, the archetypal linking to the seasons of human life, prefiguring in little the organization and meaning of 'Briggflatts'. <sup>14</sup>

If accuracy is one prerequisite of an adequate critical description, awareness of the complexities of the problem is another. It is simplistic to label Bunting as a disciple of Pound and be satisfied with that.

Kenneth Cox, finding in the spareness of Bunting's lines the tempered and taciturn spirit of the border ballads, suggests that "the re-emergence of this tradition may be of interest to those critics who stress Mr Bunting's acknowledged obligations to Ezra Pound and who ask to what extent and in what manner the example of the American master can be assimilated to a native heritage." <sup>15</sup> And further native influences on the poet's verse will shortly be considered.

The difficulty of finding a critical response of the required complexity is compounded by Bunting's insistence on the spoken rather than the written word: "Poetry, like music, is to be heard. It deals in sound - long sounds and short sounds, heavy beats and light beats, the tone relations of vowels, the relations of consonants to one another which are like instrumental colour in music.... Poetry must be read aloud." <sup>16</sup> Lacking a technique adequate to the description of such subtleties, the critic may be reduced to the unhappy position of the silent reader: "Without the sound, the reader looks at the lines as he looks at prose, seeking a meaning," whereas the poetry "is seeking to make not meaning but beauty; or if you insist on misusing words, its 'meaning' is of another kind, and lies in the relation to one another of lines and patterns of sound..." <sup>17</sup> More will be said of such a technique in Chapter IV, and of the "dangerous and even illogical" <sup>18</sup> musical analogy. Suffice to say at the moment that Bunting's verses are "oral,

in the Anglo-Saxon manner, ritualistic, and perhaps not readily acceptable to readers accustomed to conventional literary modes." <sup>19</sup> Like Chomei, Bunting is "out of place at the capital."

Unconventional in one sense, Bunting is very conventional in another, both in themes - Love, Death and Art - and in subject matter; he is concerned, as Andrew Wylie has said, "with the familiar" <sup>20</sup> (although acute observation brings the familiar into new associations: "White marble stained like a urinal," or "starlight is almost flesh"). Similarly, R.S. Woof has suggested that Bunting deals with the "great commonplaces of experience" <sup>21</sup> and finds this "a limit of the poem's strength," a view only a degree less wrong than Dodsworth's charge of lack of originality.

The point at issue here is surely that of conventionality in poetry: the modern critic in particular who has dealt sensibly and not narrowly with convention is Northrop Frye, and this suggests that his critical approach might prove useful with regard to Bunting's poetry, so deeply influenced by the poets from whom he learned his art:

Most of us tend to think of a poet's real achievement as distinct from, or even contrasted with, the achievement present in what he stole, and we are thus apt to concentrate on peripheral rather than on central critical facts. For instance, the central greatness of Paradise Regained, as a poem, is not the greatness of the rhetorical decorations that Milton added to his source, but the greatness of the theme itself, which Milton passes on to the reader from his source. <sup>22</sup>

It is not, of course, the only approach possible or necessary.

Anthony Suter in his review of Roger Guedalla's bibliography gives a good summary of work yet to be done:

Whole poems still await critical commentary, important general aspects of the poetry, such as imagery, symbolism, and not least, musical effects, the sonata, ideogrammic and structural elements, have not yet been fully treated in published works. The whole question of influence remains to be treated in detail: first, the influence of Eliot and Pound, then that of poets Bunting has read or deliberately studied in order to develop the techniques at his disposal: Mallarmé, Malherbe, Spenser, Wyatt, and many others. <sup>23</sup>



It is unfortunate that despite this admirable summary of problems to be solved, Suter's own critical articles on Bunting have sometimes only obscured his art further in the dust of allusions, references and biographical data flung up by the necessary spadework of literary scholarship, those more basic questions, for poetry such as Bunting's, of exposition and explication before critical commentary can be made. Of 'Attis: Or, Something Missing' he claims, for instance, that much of the argument depends on aspects of the thought of Lucretius, and further that without "a fairly good knowledge of Latin and Italian literature, not to mention English, the reader would find [the poem] incomprehensible without a reference book; apart from referring to Lucretius and Milton, the poem contains a parody of Cino da Pistoia and demands a knowledge of Catullus' Poem 63 about Attis." <sup>24</sup>

This is a nearsighted view, I feel. The poem qua poem "demands" no such knowledge, or only that proportion of it which may fairly be assumed to lie within the compass of the serious, intelligent, adult reader of poetry - fit audience though few, no doubt. A little learning is the safest thing, in this case: the requisite chapters of The Golden Bough, close enough acquaintance with the poetry of T.S. Eliot to recognise mocking parody, and an awareness of the sense in which Eliot was felt to be a "lost leader" by younger contemporaries at the time when the Sonata was written.

In Bunting's view, the "alleged anachronism of Pound consists in assuming a reader better acquainted with history and literature than readers usually are. Eliot's, in his devotional verse, is more fundamental. He writes as though from conditions that have vanished, as a contemporary of George Herbert. He has his reward. What is antique enough is notoriously harmless, is supine, and the ruling powers can encourage its circulation without uneasiness." <sup>25</sup> Hence the

warm obese frame limp with satiety;  
slavishly circumspect at sixty ...

(C.P., p.19)

Similarly, the complex surface of the poem and the diverse reference have most point as a recreation of what Bunting found admirable in the younger Eliot. In the quotation from Canto IX of Dante's Inferno,

VENGA  
MEDUSA CI L'FAREM DI SMALTO  
Send for Medusa: we'll enamel him!

(C.P., p.21)

Bunting aligns himself with the Furies in a rage at what has been won and lost: "The 1920 volume contained the Gautier outgautiered poems that have been so often and so blunderingly imitated. Eliot found unerringly the prescription for an enamel akin to his own.... He succeeded in bringing together under one glaze the extravagant vocabulary of parody and lines of the most august and authentic elevation, with abrupt transition or none, yet without cracking the surface ..." <sup>26</sup> It was the cracking of this surface, the dilution of the texture, particularly the lack of humour in the later Eliot, which pricked Bunting into the mockery of a poetry gone soft. <sup>27</sup>

The notes to the poem in Collected Poems certainly refer to Lucretius and Cino da Pistoia, but Bunting's notes are there either, as he sometimes claims, as a joke - "to keep the professors guessing" - or as a directive to further reading of possible interest: certainly not as an invitation to seek the meaning of the poems therein.

As an example one could take the two fine quatrains which close Section I of the poem:

Praise the green earth. Chance has appointed her  
home, workshop, larder, middenpit.  
Her lousy skin scabbed here and there by  
cities provides us with name and nation.

From her brooks sweat. Hers corn and fruit.  
Earthquakes are hers too. Ravenous animals

are sent by her. Praise her and call her  
Mother and Mother of Gods and Eunuchs.

(C.P., p.20)

Whereas Bunting is content to admire the force of this "imitation of Latin (not Greek) alchaics" <sup>28</sup> in preference to the rest of Section I, which he claims no longer fully to understand, being "too far from what it was about now," Suter asserts that the passage "has its value as a reference point to the view of [Lucretius] on nature and the gods." <sup>29</sup> Would he assert similarly that 'Chomei at Toyama' has its value as a reference to the Hojoki, or 'Villon' as a reference to Villon?

He almost seems to at one point: "no one but a Villon specialist is likely to recognise the reference, in Part II of the poem, to the fact that Villon himself refers to Psalm 108 (sic) in Le Testament." <sup>30</sup> Bunting incorporates his own version of part of the psalm in his text, but this can have a value only for the truly initiated.... [He] achieves a 'literary echo' only for an extremely limited group of readers." <sup>31</sup>

This comment might have more value if Bunting were setting out to "achieve a literary echo" in the first place in the lines under consideration:

Let his days be few and let  
his bishoprick pass to another,  
for he fed me on carrion and on a dry crust,  
mouldy bread that his dog had vomited.

(C.P., p.15)

What he achieves in effect is a "realistic" bitterness, by means of rhythm, image, alliteration and diction, as well as matching these to the persona of Villon (the archaic spelling of "bishoprick pass", for example, we interpret as medieval, while also approving the possible double entendre as fitting to the reputation of the speaker <sup>32</sup>). The literary reference lies behind all this not as an "echo" but as a reminder of the essential artifice of poetry. Suter's mistake here was to seek for meaning not beauty, to use Bunting's terms, the beauty of the passage residing

in "the relation to one another of lines and patterns of sound," certainly, but also in the relation between art and reality (or beauty and truth? <sup>33</sup>) unstated but implicit, on which this passage pivots, as does the poem as a whole:

precision clarifying vagueness;  
 boundery to a wilderness  
 of detail; chisel voice  
 smoothing the flanks of noise

(C.P., p.17)

Thus to attempt to sniff out traces of influences on poetry as literary and seemingly diverse as Bunting's is to court the ignominy of barking up a whole stand of wrong trees, at worst, or to lose sight of the wood in amazed examination of individual trees, at the least. Once again Northrop Frye's approach seems to me preferable, if only because he accepts echoes and influences as completely natural within a literary cosmos: "Literature may have life, reality, experience, nature, imaginative truth, social conditions or what you will for its content; but literature itself is not made out of these things. Poetry can only be made out of other poems; novels out of other novels. Literature shapes itself, and is not shaped externally: the forms of literature can no more exist outside literature than the forms of sonata and fugue and rondo can exist outside music." <sup>34</sup> Questions of achieving a literary echo seem, somehow, beside the point in the face of still unexamined problems of coherence and structure.

Frye's archetypal criticism, to be sure, often arouses suspicion ("when you hear talk of archetypes, reach for your reality principle," <sup>35</sup> warns Frank Kermode) but it at least sorts well with the deep and hidden feelings which for Bunting lie at the heart of poetry: "lines and patterns of sound, perhaps harmonious, perhaps contrasting and clashing, which the reader feels rather than understands; lines of sound drawn in the air which stir deep emotions which have not even a name in prose." <sup>36</sup>

That the emotions are deep does not release the critic from his obligation of drawing them to the surface, however. Though Bunting is forceful in his dislike and distrust of criticism, it is not enough to note, as Andrew Wylie does, a characteristic method (Bunting's fondness for lists: names in 'Villon', monosyllabic verbs in 'The Spoils' Section II) and go on: "So much for one method; the point is to note the flexibility. Beyond this, and beyond the sound from it, there's no need to hunt for meanings: 'Follow the clue patiently and you will understand nothing'." <sup>37</sup>

Although, as we have seen, much patient following of the literary "clues" which are spread across the surface of Bunting's work has led some critics to "understand nothing" of its real import, Wylie's method would suit no-one but Bunting himself at his most arrogant or arcane. Bunting's own approach to criticism was and is to take such an anti-intellectual stance since "all arts are of a party against the intellect," <sup>38</sup> but he is aware at least of the complexities involved in it:

The principles of criticism must be looked for in a realm that embraces all the arts, and where the intellect, however important to the critic as the regulator of his other faculties, plays a limited and subordinate part.... It is probable that the principles that may be found in it will be inexpressible in the language of logic. If Beauty and Sublimity escape easy definition - how shall their ingredients be tabbed? But until some attempt has been made to describe them criticism must remain more a matter of luck than cunning, of an inborn sympathy than of acquired technique. <sup>39</sup>

An uncompromising view, which has changed only in expression in the half a century since it was written, as is evident from parts of 'A Statement', yet most critics would in any case agree that "the theoreticians will follow the artist and fail to explain him." Besides, Bunting admits that a certain amount of criticism "for the detection of fraud and adulteration is necessary policework," <sup>40</sup> (charges brought against him at the beginning of this chapter by certain critics, it will

be remembered) although that policework "must keep within the rules of evidence: fact, not hearsay; history, not speculation..."

Thus criticism, like poetry, must be concerned accurately with the object, the thing, and not ignore the rules of poetic evidence to chase after false identities, red herrings however scholarly, and other suspect influences.

With this caution in mind, I will endeavour to retrace Bunting's steps to the original formative influences on his style:

If ever I learned the trick of it, it was mostly from poets long dead whose names are obvious: Wordsworth and Dante, Horace, Wyatt and Malherbe, Manuchehri and Ferdosi, Villon, Whitman, Edmund Spenser; but two living men also taught me much: Ezra Pound and in his sterner, stonier way, Louis Zukofsky.

(Preface to C.P.)

I am aware that it will be possible to give only an indication of the complexity awaiting future exploration, but the lines of approach are those I consider to be the most relevant and valid for a deeper understanding of Bunting's work. Apart from examining borrowings of phrase and image, I am interested to see the extent to which form may also be imitated. The main ideas, to my mind, which emerge are firstly that Bunting displays, in Northrop Frye's terms, "profound" rather than shallow imitation,<sup>41</sup> and that he is in this sense an original; and secondly that he may be seen and placed in a main tradition of English poetry which goes back through the Romantics and Milton to Spenser and the early poetry of the English Renaissance. It is perhaps more obvious now than formerly that Bunting is well rooted in English life and letters, but some counterweight to the strong earlier impression of him as a rootless - and hence under-nourished and unsatisfactory - international modernist might be advisable.

Bunting has made no secret of his debt to other poets: "Poetry is a craft you learn by trying. You get hints of it from other men who do

the thing well and have thought about it" <sup>42</sup> - the debt any apprentice would own to his master - but precise detection of influences is very difficult. Ezra Pound and his followers laid much stress on the judgment of "the expert" (the poet as best critic of poems) but even experts can show confusion on this point. In a letter to Harriet Monroe Bunting wrote,

Re. Chomei: Ezra likes it and so does Yeats, but Eliot speaks ill of it because I haven't been in Japan, which seems irrelevant, and because he says it echoes Pound, which, if true, would be a count against it. But Pound supposes it to contain echoes of Eliot. I'm not aware of echoing anybody. Except Chomei: his book was in prose and four to five times as long as my poem. <sup>43</sup>

In this complex matter, for want of an order of merit, it seems simplest to follow the order of the list of poets quoted above from the Preface to Collected Poems: lists are seldom arbitrary in their ordering, and if Bunting is not prompted by concerns of euphony, this may represent a subjective order of priorities, or at the least a linking of like influences.

#### "Wordsworth and Dante"

Wordsworth heads the list, and his influence also took precedence in time. In a letter to Zukofsky, Bunting credits Wordsworth for showing him when he was "a small kid ... what [poetry] was." <sup>44</sup> The simplicity of the Lucy poems had a striking effect on the young listener: Wordsworth "attempted in Lucy etc. the simplicity which is commonly recommended as the nearest road to the sublime, and sometimes came within sight of the distant peak," <sup>45</sup> and Bunting has attempted to achieve this simplicity himself not only by the compression of speech in his dialect poems, but in his condensation of real speech into simple, naturally rhythmic patterns in his poetry. (One may also speculate on the extent to which his own poem which comes within sight of the sublime, 'Briggflatts', had its roots in these early perceptions, sharing as it does with the Lucy

poems not only a simplicity of diction and an identification of the human and the natural worlds, but also the haunting theme of the psychological burial of love).

The results of a life-time's work in pursuit of simplicity is readily apparent if we compare the opening poems of "First Book of Odes" with their "poetic" diction and syntax:

O Sun! Should I invoke this scorn, participate  
in the inconsequence of this defeat, or hide  
in noctambulistic exile to penetrate  
secrets that moon and stars and empty death deride?

(C.P., p.90)

with the closing poems of "Second Book of Odes":

Lips salty, her hair  
matted, powdered with ash;  
sweat sublimes from her armpit  
when the young men go past

(C.P., p.132)

What is remarkable here is the fine contrasting force of the final line of the early ode, achieved by alliteration and the apt placing of monosyllables, but above all by the marked simplicity of the vocabulary - as if he too sought to take by this means the nearest road to the sublime (it is a "trick" repeated in the final lines of Odes 2, 3, 8 and 9 in "First Book of Odes"). In "Second Book of Odes", on the other hand, simplicity is all, with only an occasional pointer to the high aim - in the above instance, the oddly accurate and paradoxical elevation of "sublimes".

Kenneth Cox, in his linking of Bunting's poetry with the spare tradition of the border ballads, also places Wordsworth in this Northern mode, citing the famous words of the Preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads: "to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, ... in a selection of language really used by men." In Bunting's case this is the language of



Northumberland, its accents and, on occasion, its dialect: he has recently edited a selection of the poems of the nineteenth century dialect poet, Joseph Skipsey.<sup>46</sup> With his concern for the spoken voice in poetry, he is aware of the need for accuracy in this matter. In his introductory remarks to his reading of Wordsworth's 'The Brothers',<sup>47</sup> for instance, he admitted that the Cumbrian poet Norman Nicholson could have given a rendering closer to the sound originally intended, and spoken, in Wordsworth's composition.

It is noteworthy that in all his international wanderings and poetic settings Bunting never omits to leave time and space for northern voices and references:

Unclean, immature and unseasonable salmon.<sup>48</sup>  
('Villon')

in the distance Cheviot's  
heatherbrown flanks and white cap.

('Attis: Or, Something Missing')

kids carrying the clap to school under their pinnies  
('The Well of Lycopolis')

leaving sterile ram, weakly hogg to the flock  
('The Spoils').

And these voices are given greater scope in the dialect poems of 1930, 'Gin the Goodwife Stint' and 'The Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer'.

Bunting himself, however, admires in Wordsworth not the sound but chiefly his narrative skill: "he holds his reader like hardly any other poet for many generations before him. As a storyteller, he is one of the family of Chaucer, and perhaps the foremost of the family."<sup>49</sup> There has always been in Bunting an eagerness for story or plot, evident in his undertaking the study of classical Persian in order to learn the conclusion of Ferdosi's Shahnamah, The Epic of Kings, when his secondhand French translation of that epic ended midway through the poem; or in his

admiration for "the extraordinary narrative skill of some chapters of the Book of Kings." <sup>50</sup>

In a recent conversation, <sup>51</sup> Bunting said that he could never learn from Wordsworth's narrative skill, but that he did learn from his childhood reading of the poet the great effect that could be got from the simplest words (a reiteration of the point made in his letter to Zukofsky, quoted above). It is true that his own long poems are difficult to grasp totally through their lack of plain narrative and their rhythmical complexity - although I will later suggest that a different kind of narrative may be apparent in them.

Another feature of Wordsworth's poetry admired by Bunting is its clarity. He writes: "When Herbert Read came back to the North, the North came back to him, bringing, as it must, renewal of the unencumbered clarity it bred in Wordsworth." <sup>52</sup> The comment might apply equally well to his own poem of return, 'Briggflatts', and recent uncollected poems perhaps reflect his experience of, indeed his identification with, a Border landscape where "the wind is wholly Scottish, blowing from the Highlands and bringing with it the pureness of air that makes the Tweed one of the areas of greatest clarity and loveliest skies in Britain. Visibility of over fifty miles is not unusual." <sup>53</sup> Hence, it may be, the marked emphasis on light in the thirty lines from 'A New Moon' reprinted in Appendix B: "light pelts hard now my sun's low," "light stots from stone," "but a land swaddled in light? Listen, make out/lightfall singing on a wall mottled grey." And in a recently published poem which opens with an attack on literary critics:

All the cants they peddle  
bellow entangled,  
teeth for knots and  
each other's ankles ...

the second verse replies,

Yet even these  
 even these might  
 listen as crags  
 listen to light ... 54

But the influence of Wordsworth must have been something deeper than a shared landscape and love of a certain bleak clarity, to judge from the tenor of Bunting's most recent comment:

Both Pound and Eliot despised Wordsworth, who to me at any rate is along with Dante the most profound influence of the lot. He's not, as he's usually presented, founder of the Romantics at all. He's the summer-up of the eighteenth century and the revolutions he made, which are profound enough, were immediately met by the counter-revolution of Keats, who reintroduced all the bloody poetic language and all the other stuff and nonsense which takes away all the sharp edges. 55

The deeper influence on Bunting's poetry may be thought to be structural - but only in a very general sense, I think. It might be coincidence that Bunting's "lofty, an empty combe" in the final lines of 'Briggflatts' echoes the "sylvan combs" of the final page of 'The Prelude'. 56 In both poems autobiographical material is structured round flashes of insight which illustrate the "growth of a poet's mind." That the growth of Bunting's mind seems more sporadic or syncopated, all flashes, must be put down to the influence of "the symbolist technique of getting cosmic coverage by omission of syntactical connections ... The abrupt opposition of images, sounds, rhythms and facts is omnipresent in the modern poem, symphony, dance and newspaper." 57 Bunting's response to the modern in art and society (as in his praise of Eliot's experiment with jazz rhythms 58), and his distrust of metaphysics and outmoded poetics precluded a return to Wordsworthian length.

But there is a deeper influence of theme and image. In what follows I am indebted to the insights of G. Wilson Knight in The Starlit Dome, which have brought out for me the implications of some of Bunting's central images and their relation not only to Wordsworth but to Romantic poetry in general.



become almost personal, so his favourite, usually solitary, persons become likewise symbols of eternity." <sup>60</sup> Taking 'Resolution and Independence' as his example, G. Wilson Knight stresses that "nature's enigmatic and awful appearances are identified with a human figure of this lonely, enduring, unemotional, type .... These are all, moreover, self exploitations; for Wordsworth too is solitary, monastic, and prophetic in cast of mind, bearing as best he may some awful yet mystically placid, yet again disturbing, revelation." <sup>61</sup> Beneath a more literary poetic surface - there are, after all, many other influences operating - Bunting feels himself akin to this "lonely prophet of the eternal":

Stars disperse. We too  
further from neighbours  
now the year ages.

(C.P., p.67)

More important than affinity of personality or persona, however, are the correspondences - they may or may not be direct influences - of imagery, and in particular that of the geometrical solid and dome symbolism with which G. Wilson Knight makes such interesting play in his book. The link here is with Wordsworth, certainly, but also with Romantic poetry in general, and would have been absorbed in Bunting's early reading: the point to notice is his reworking of the tradition.

Though both Bunting and Wordsworth reject the attempts of science "to 'unsoul' by 'syllogistic words' the 'mysteries of being' and relegate the 'visible universe' to a 'microscopic view'" <sup>62</sup> (one thinks of the final lines of Section II of 'Villon', "But they have named all the stars") <sup>63</sup> both seem to rate pure mathematics, in particular geometry, highly. In Wordsworth, geometrical laws

induce a peaceful intuition of 'permanent and universal sway' pointing 'finite natures' towards the 'Supreme Existence, the surpassing life' beyond all boundaries, changeless and with no welterings of passion. This relation of the geometrical to

'God' and 'transcendent peace' reflects Coleridge's circular dome-symbolisms, wherein the geometrical mind is clearly at work. 64

It is interesting to note in a letter to Zukofsky how Bunting, in discussing Ode 36, falls naturally into a geometrical terminology: "'impending' is weak, but I couldn't find what's wanted - what's the word for quarter of the solid formed by the rotation of an ellipse on its axis, and has it an adjective?" 65 It is interesting, further, to see that his note in Collected Poems (p.159) was occasioned by the confusion on a friend's part - possibly Zukofsky - that the poem "was intended as an argument for the existence of God" - whereas it is of course Bunting's recreation of art as eternity.

The poem was written after his encounter with Islamic civilisation in which he was able to find, in reality, something akin to the dream symbolism of 'The Prelude' (Book V, ll.50-140) where the poetic and geometric faculties are neatly fused in Wordsworth's dream of a Bedouin bearing a stone ("Euclid's elements") and a shell of "surpassing brightness." For G. Wilson Knight,

The stone is scientific "reason" ... Though it ranges through universal law, it remains the human mind as we know it. But the shell holds the key to an entirely new psychic order ... It symbolizes a hidden eternity-music within the inanimate, and relates to and fuses both time and space, being a melodious solid ... As with Coleridge, the whole passage is saturated in a paradoxical dream-consciousness blending impossibilities. The objects are themselves, yet also books; their possessor is Don Quixote, yet also an Arab ... 66

In his experience of the Arab world, if one may turn from Wordsworth's dream to Bunting's reality, Bunting found a way of blending impossibilities while remaining true to objective reality. So in Section I of 'The Spoils' he is able to blend Babylonian satanism with Hebraic sanctity, romance with savagery, the "mystic glamour of sex that conditions human creation" 67 with an awareness and acceptance of death.

In Section II, as a counterweight to the scientific reason and political energy of the Seljuk empire, "all the construction and organisation afoot," Bunting takes the new psychic order of architectural coherence which arose from it:

The light is sufficient  
to perceive the motions of prayer  
and the place cool.

. . . . .

The south dome, Nezam-ol-Molk's,  
grows without violence from the walls  
of a square chamber.

But as Wordsworth's dreaming mind contained both stone and shell, so for Bunting, at this active stage of his career, the poet exists between rational, scientific energies and the spiritual values of eternal laws. The line, "Their passion's body was bricks and its soul algebra," may remind us that Omar Khayyam was renowned more as a mathematician than as a poet in Persia, and was the author of one of the best medieval treatises on algebra. Yet whether in his ancient guise as Khayyam, or in his modern form, Bunting himself, the poet is aloof, judges, and holds the reality of the situation in his judgments:

I wonder what Khayyam thought  
of all the construction and organisation afoot,  
foreigners, resolute Seljuks, not so bloodthirsty  
as some benefactors of mankind ...

(C.P., p.42)

At the same time the poet builds for himself and for others an alternative version of eternity. Malekshah, one of the powerful Persian viziers wisely appointed by the Seljuks to govern their Empire, and under whom that Empire reached its zenith,

found Khayyam a better reckoner  
than the Author of the Qor'an. <sup>68</sup>

(C.P., p.41)

From Bunting the art of the Persian musician easily evokes the sublime comparison, "as a pair of gods might dodge and tag between stars"

(C.P., pp. 42-43).

There seems to be "a hidden eternity-music" behind the animation of this new culture. Bunting's own attempt at a fusion of time and space is achieved with a marvellous quiet and economy (appropriately after poetry is read) in the word "azan", with its evocation of the mosque, the dome from which emanates the mo'ezzin's call to prayer:

resonant verse spilled  
from Onsori, Sa'di,  
till the girls' mutter is lost  
in whisper of stream and leaf,  
a final nightingale  
under a fading sky  
azan on their quiet.

(C.P., p.43)

His note on a word with no English equivalent expresses the mood and his intention: "The azan is the mo'ezzin's call to prayer. You hardly hear its delicate, wavering airs at other times, but an hour before sunrise it has such magic as no other music, unless perhaps the nightingale in lands where nightingales are rare" (C.P., p.156).

It is important to see that such a fusion as this is no esoteric exercise. Just as the Seljuks chose as prime minister Nezam-ol-Molk, a man who united in himself the best of the active and the contemplative life, so this image is won by Bunting only after engagement with war and the affairs of men. It is this concern with the actual - these domes and melodious solids are not from Coleridge, merely, nor from Shelley - that makes valid the active sublimity of the final lines of this section of the poem:

Have you seen a falcon stoop  
accurate, unforeseen  
and absolute, between  
wind-ripples over harvest. Dread  
of what's to be, is and has been -  
were we not better dead?

If we compare the fifth line of the above with the earlier and



weaker "Time is, was, has been" in 'The Well of Lycopolis' (C.P., p.30) - weaker because lacking any context but the literary: his note refers to Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay - where Bunting strives for an ill-defined elevation with resultant diffuseness, we can see how for him the Arabian world brought into focus the dazzling world of light: far from the early "fizzling ... cinders" he achieves under the impact of experience a poetry which also soars:

His wings churn air  
to flight.  
Feathers alight  
with sun, he rises where  
dazzle rebuts our stare,  
wonder our fright.

(C.P., p.44)

Bunting, like Wordsworth, had long sought "some sacred structure outlasting time." <sup>69</sup> Wordsworth's

Oh! why hath not the Mind  
Some element to stamp her image on  
In nature somewhat nearer to her own?  
Why, gifted with such powers to send abroad  
Her spirit, must it lodge in shrines so frail?

('The Prelude' V. 1.45 ff.)

is developed by Bunting's cry,

If words were stone, if the sun's lilt  
could be fixed in the stone's convexity

(C.P., p.32).

There is development in the sense that Bunting seems more acutely aware of the difficulties for the mason's art in building such a structure. He was, moreover, willing to travel further to achieve his vision. Whereas Wordsworth was always "a Norse poet, happiest in bleak solitudes," employing in 'The Prelude' a style that is "peculiarly bare, with long stretches that avoid any heightening through traditional associations of royalty, martial glory, gold, sun or sexual romance," <sup>70</sup> Bunting has always, even in his later, bleaker persona, been willing to travel south in search of heightening and romance,

About ship! Sweat in the south. Go bare. . .

(C.P., p.56)

where "Carmencita's tawny paps" still solace the recluse of Lindisfarne.

Yet despite such differences in personality and verbal texture, Bunting and Wordsworth are akin in one central respect which creates a similarity of mood at important moments in their poetry: the strange but Wordsworthian doctrine that "You can fall back on dreadful imaginings, even crime, as a source, somehow, of peace." <sup>71</sup> Some such doctrine seems to underlie not only Section IV of 'Briggflatts' ("tomcat stink of a leopard dying while I stood / easing the bolt to dwell on a round's shining rim. / I hear Aneurin number the dead and rejoice") but in a personal sense - the love was, after all, deliberately destroyed - the poem as a whole. It underlies too the final war scenes of 'The Spoils', and the last lines of 'The Well of Lycopolis'.

A little more could be said of Bunting's links with Romantic poetry: as much, at any rate, as will bring us several degrees nearer to the poet who shares with Wordsworth first place in Bunting's list of masters, Dante.

To move from Wordsworth to Coleridge is a natural step, and I am interested, here and elsewhere, to see to what extent Bunting has achieved what G. Wilson Knight terms Coleridge's Divine Comedy, in which 'Christabel', 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Kubla Khan' "may be grouped as a little Divina Commedia, exploring in turn Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven." <sup>72</sup>

Bunting shared, I think, Coleridge's "itch for transcendence," <sup>73</sup> although his stronger personality means that there is in his poetry less agonizing, dementia or fear, - or more accurately, that these qualities, discernible in the early persona, disappear under the twin impact of strengthened powers of craftsmanship and matured awareness of life.

Here again the symbolic imagery employed by Bunting may be deciphered

by reference to its analogues in Romantic poetry. Coleridge's use of mountains is likened by Knight to his use of the dome, as an allegory of poetic achievement, "symbolical of spiritual effort and ascendance," <sup>74</sup> and Largo Law in 'The Spoils' and Alexander's mountain in 'Briggflatts' have a similar significance for the modern poet with a natural desire to say of his own work, as he said of Pound's,

These are the Alps,  
fools! Sit down and wait for them to crumble.

(C.P., p.122)

A remarkable feature of Bunting's poetry, as of Coleridge's, is the recurrent association between a lady and poetry and music. "These various ladies might almost be called means of addressing the poetic faculty: which is, however, itself closely entwined, like Dante's Beatrice, with youthful love-magic." <sup>75</sup> Whether Bunting first encountered this association in Coleridge or in Dante is immaterial to the more important point of observing how the various female figures linked with poetry or music in the early Odes, Helen Egli in Ode 5, Anne de Silver in Ode 33 and Violet in Ode 34, prepare the way for the youthful love and music of 'Briggflatts':

In such soft air  
they trudge and sing,  
laying the tune frankly on the air.

(C.P., p.52)

'Briggflatts', as we shall see, rehearses the progress of Bunting's poetry in general from its beginnings. The particular expressions of the poet's progress are the Sonatas, and these may be seen as moving from an Inferno ('Villon', 'Attis', 'Aus dem Zweiten Reich' and 'The Well of Lycopolis') through a Purgatory in 'The Spoils' to point towards a Paradise beyond the ending of 'Briggflatts'. It is important to remember when considering the implications of the sea imagery in Bunting's work that, as in 'The Ancient Mariner', the new life flows from an

acceptance of the watery and reptilian realm: this is the function of Lud's first speech in Section I of 'The Spoils',

When Tigris floods snakes swarm in the city,  
coral, jade, jet, between jet and jade, yellow,  
enamelled toys.

(C.P., p.38)

It is the function also of the later,

Staithes, filthy harbour water,  
a drowned Finn, a drowned Chinese;  
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.  
.  
.  
Rosyth guns sang. Sang tide through cable  
for Glasgow burning.

(C.P., p.47)

Where could this acceptance lead but to the starlit dome, the "Heaven-dome equation (with ice, as in Kubla Khan, and underfeeling of many other white structures, mountains and otherwise) ... As so often, the bright structure lifts above water." <sup>76</sup> So at the completion of 'Briggflatts',

Snow lies bright on Hedgehope  
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.  
Orion strides over Farne

(C.P., pp. 69-70).

Thus we have seen Bunting working and reworking traditional images of Romantic poetry, aiming to achieve something of their sublime power, while avoiding a dogmatic or too easily assignable "meaning". That he managed to achieve this without becoming diffuse or verbose in the process is probably due to the influence of Dante more than to any other single cause.

From Dante Bunting learned something of the use of ordinary diction and speech patterns as ways of creating an economical poetry. He has said that Dante taught him to say a thing once, sharply and precisely -

a better model than Shakespeare in this regard, who tends to take several metaphoric attempts on his meaning - and this has had an obvious effect on the texture and substance of his verse.

The qualities he found to admire in Dante are identical with those Pound had earlier discovered: precision, concreteness and clarity - "the definiteness of Dante's presentation, as compared with Milton's rhetoric," as he put it in 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', the distinction between rhetoric and poetic imagery being further developed in his article 'Vorticism' (1914), with Dante seen as a great poet "by reason of this [imagistic] faculty."

Bunting's comparison between Dante and Shakespeare to the latter's disadvantage may derive from Pound's remark in The Spirit of Romance that "It is part of Dante's aristocracy that he conceded nothing to the world or to opinion ... Shakespeare concedes, succeeds, and repents in one swift bitter line ...." It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Bunting came to Dante through Pound. From Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal we learn that as a young man he knew "a good deal of the Inferno by heart," and the profound influence of Dante on both modern poets is an example of what Bunting meant when he talked of "finding a man whose thoughts were working on parallel lines who happened to be senior." <sup>77</sup> It is interesting, therefore, to compare what each has made of the medieval poet's example.

In a recent essay, 'Dante and Pound', G. Singh has suggested that "Pound set out to achieve a fusion between Dante's Europeanism and Whitman's Americanism on the one hand, and between the form of the Odyssey and the Divine Comedy on the other." <sup>78</sup> Bunting's motives and concerns were less entangled than this, more singleminded, more limited than Pound's, certainly, but perhaps for that reason more capable of formal solution: his primary concerns being to find a firm structure

suited to modernist poetics, and to link poetry more closely to music.

An obvious overlap between these ideas and those of Pound is revealed in Pound's interview with Donald Hall in 1962: "Only a musical form would take the material, and the Confucian universe as I see it is a universe of interacting strains and tensions..... I was not following the three divisions of the Divine Comedy exactly. One can't follow the Dantesquan cosmos in an age of experiment."<sup>79</sup> Yet if we look at the larger structures of Pound and Bunting, the Cantos and the Inferno-Purgatorio-Paradiso form outlined for the Sonatas above, we can see that whereas in Pound Hell, Purgatory and Heaven are continually juxtaposed and intersected, Dante's cones and circles reflected, as it were, from pieces of a shattered mirror, Bunting's poetic journey is a far more straightforward and Dantesque one, from darkness of a prison cell and tomb in 'Villon', through sterility, cold, debauchery and rage in the Sonatas of the early thirties, with the poems becoming darker and more tortured by turn, through a cleansing war and acceptance of human mortality in 'The Spoils', to the final clarity of vision in 'Briggflatts'. It is interesting to note that, like Dante, Bunting is conducted to this ultimate vision by the memory of a young girl, whereas in the earlier stages of his journey, to judge by his main references, his guides, like Dante's, had been poets: Villon in 'Villon', Catullus (Carmen LXIII) and Lucretius in 'Attis', (with Eliot as a lost guide), Dante in 'Lycopolis', and Omar Khayyam in 'The Spoils'.

Looking at the detail of the earlier poems, one would have to agree that the poet "can't follow the Dantesquan cosmos" with any great ease. While there are considerations of the musical effect of the sound of the references, (as, for example, in the skilful use of sibilants to create a snake-like menace for the Furies from Dante in 'Attis' Section II), and while, in the same instance, Bunting does gloss the quotation in the text,

"Send for Medusa: we'll enamel him!" (C.P., p.21), it must be admitted that other references such as the "(eh, Cino?)" at the end of the same section of the poem, taking us through Pound's 'Cino', to Cino da Pistoia, the friend of Dante and to the Dolce stil nuovo, leave us wondering whether the search has achieved anything worth the effort, or whether we might complain of Bunting as Noel Stock does of Pound: "When we fail to understand a passage the reason often is that we cannot see what Pound is describing because he has given us too small a fragment. Too small for us to be able to make out the shape of the whole and the necessary background." <sup>80</sup>

That said, I feel it is a fault which, never so obtrusive as in Pound, has lessened with maturity (or perhaps simply as Bunting moved further away from Rapallo).

It is in the area of ethical and spiritual values rather than of structure that Bunting and Pound have most clearly shared an inheritance from Dante. For both, the power of money is an outward sign of inward rottenness in society, although usury never became for Bunting the moral and religious issue it was for Pound. Perhaps because of his early training at the London School of Economics and the boredom which that occasioned, and perhaps because Bunting had already begun to move away from Pound (to the Canaries and the U.S.A.) in the early thirties when the elder poet's increasing interest in and pronouncements on economics had begun to alter the original direction of the Cantos, economic themes are not so central in Collected Poems.

There is some development of them in the Sonatas - the indictment of German materialism in 'Aus dem Zweiten Reich', the "bank for Lydian pebbles" in 'The Spoils', the gusto (the tone is less tortured than Pound's) of part of 'Briggflatts' Section III, "scavengers/whose palms scoop droppings to mould/cakes for hungry towns." There is a greater

development in "First Book of Odes", in Odes 12, 14, 18, 24, 31, 32 - the last with the Poundian

Let them remember Samangan against usurers,  
cheats and cheapjacks, amongst boasters,  
hideous children of cautious marriages,  
those who drink in contempt of joy.

(C.P., p.117)

It is noteworthy that the smaller scope of the ode enables Bunting to keep a tighter control over the theme; and also that his economic policy is, as he says of his philosophy in the meantime interview (p.72), "English eclecticism," and more amenable than Pound's to evoking the desired response in the reader, though not the less powerfully felt for that:

Sheep and cattle are poor men's food,  
grouse is sport for the rich;  
heather grows where the sweet grass might grow  
for the cost of cleaning the ditch.

(C.P., p.105)

The theme of the destructive power of money is perhaps best expressed in Bunting's work not by negation or denunciation but by the re-creation of a positive society where money seems powerless to distort natural abundance:

Thighs in a sunshaft, uncontrollable smile,  
she tossed the pence aside in a brothel under the wall.

(C.P., p.39)

and

They despise police work,  
are not masters of filing;  
always a task for foreigners  
to make them unhappy,  
unproductive and rich.

(C.P., p.43)

Dante, though a product of a vastly different culture, nevertheless provided for Bunting as for Pound a hierarchy of values, "a sort of Hague tribunal to judge and decide between nations." <sup>81</sup> Bunting makes



most direct reference to this judiciary in 'The Well of Lycopolis', Section IV. He interposes there lines 117-126 of Canto VII of the Inferno, lines 121-126 at the beginning, lines 117-119 at the end of the section.

The mud of hell here creates an apt evocation of trench warfare during the First World War. The sin of Canto VII itself has relevance; in the fifth circle it is that of uncontrolled temper, the root, as Bunting sees it, of the kind of war-mongering "patriotism" to which he objected at the time, with painful consequences. The mire filling the mouths of these violent inhabitants of Hell is usually taken by commentators to mean the foulness of speech which is a frequent sign of such intemperance of spirit; hence Bunting's employment of soldiers' slang in the section, as well as evidence of their disruption of home life when on leave:

          queued up for the pox in Rouen. What a blighty!

          . . . . .

          Overstayed leave.

          Debauched the neighbor's little girl

          to save two shillings . . .

                          (C.P., pp.34-35)

The quality of Bunting's translation from Dante in this section, at once economical and easy, is itself noteworthy. But it is his addition to Dante of the beautiful last line of the poem, "as though Styx were silvered by a wind from Heaven", which points to Bunting's final intention and direction. If the Divine Comedy represents the progress of the human soul towards the restoration of its lost moral dignity, Bunting's progress is towards a lost poetic power, whereby inspiration can transform even the foulest situation into something not only beautiful but valid for all men. By 'The Well of Lycopolis' he felt that he too had got stuck in the mud, and the poem evokes very powerfully in its earlier sections a feeling of self disgust and despair. Yet the

example of earlier poets such as Dante showed that the thing was possible, that the surface of life and death could be made to "sparkle and dance," not merely, as in the Inferno, to "bubble and boil." The search for coherence and meaning, which only the artist could bring, had to go on, and progress was finally made, as I have suggested, by a return to Dante's original track: through hatred and hell to the comprehension of a different society and a second war in the next sonata, 'The Spoils', from which the poet emerged poised and confident for his final achievement. The immortality of art, though an important theme for Bunting, is less important there than the artist's sustaining power to bring past, present and future experience into alignment and harmony. This is as true of 'Briggflatts' as it is of the Divine Comedy and 'The Prelude': by the final section "Then is Now," and the Coda carries the momentum on into the future.

From Wordsworth and Dante, then, Bunting learned this truth, besides clarity from both. To the Romantic theme of the supremacy of the poetic act of imagination, he added the medieval poet's moral passion towards the attainment of such a goal, bringing the growth of a poet's mind within the formal discipline of a tested poetic structure.

#### "Horace"

The influence which Horace had on Bunting's poetry is in the area of line to line poetic technique rather than on structure or image. At our first meeting he quoted the opening line from Ode XIII of Horace's Third Book of Odes, "O Fons Bandusiae, splendidior vitro," as an example of perfect linking of sound to sense, expressing through the rippling rhythm and liquid consonants the spring which is its subject.

Bunting's finest tribute to such poetic example, however, is his own 'Stones trip Coquet burn', written after the publication of Collected

Poems, and revealing a similar skill in evoking through sound and rhythm the Northumbrian stream:

Stones trip Coquet burn.  
Grass trails, tickles  
till her glass thrills.

The breeze she wears  
lifts and falls back.  
Where beast cool

in midgy shimmer  
she dares me chase  
under a bridge,

giggle, ceramic  
huddle of notes,  
darts from gorse

and I follow, fooled.  
She must rest, surely;  
some steep pool

to plodge or dip  
and silent taste  
with all my skin. 82

His knowledge of Horace has meant that allusions to lines of the Latin poet occur here and there: the "unabashed girls and boys" of Bunting's Preface, for example, must derive from Horace's "carmina non prius / audita Musarum sacerdos / virginibus puerisque canto" (Book III, Ode 1). Again, the description in 'The Well of Lycopolis' of the committed poets of the thirties as

Sleek, slick lads treading gingerly between the bedpots

. . . . .

smooth, with soft steps, ambiguoque voltu

(C.P., p.32)

refers to Ode V of the Second Book of Odes, and its description of Cnidian Gyges, ("obscurum solutis/ crinibus ambiguoque voltu") who was "so fair that if you set him in a group of girls even sharp-eyed strangers could not spot his difference from the rest, with his flowing locks and girl-boy face." In Bunting's line, then, the reference is used in disparagement of the homosexuality of some of those poets.

More important, perhaps, is the inference inherent in ambiguous vultu that these poets did not face squarely in their work the effect of the economic problems of the time upon the poor; it was possible to adopt a Marxian stance while gingerly avoiding contact with the real stink arising from the Depression, the human suffering involved. Bunting, with his roots near Jarrow, identified strongly with miner and farm labourer, with "goodwife" and "bairn." (C.P., p.100). He himself had endured poverty, albeit from choice, in his refusal to compromise his vocation to the poet's ill-paid trade:

I too was once a millionaire  
(in Germany during the inflation:  
when the train steamed into Holland  
I had not enough for a bun.)

(C.P., p.98)

Apart from direct references to poems of Horace, however, there is also the shared concern with structural tightness, word positioning and enjambment which marks the Horatian poem as much as it does the Objectivist poetics of William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky and, in so far as he corresponded frequently with Zukofsky during much of his creative life, Basil Bunting. Whether the American poets learned anything directly from Horace I am unsure, but Bunting certainly felt compelled to advance the claims of the Latin poet to Zukofsky, chiding him for forgetting the "more permanent values" Horace represented, and suggesting that "Horace works wonders with a word order which was crabbed even to his contemporaries ... It is not right to banish such effects, which have their place, one I think too much neglected now, even though we and especially I follow Yeats's example of plain diction and plain syntax." <sup>83</sup>

Economy, restraint, abrupt transitions and paradox are all features of Horace's poetry which might be termed its "permanent values," but there is also the consideration of theme, the lack of which strong and simple human relevance, in Bunting's view, undermines despite its skill

much of the poetry of Zukofsky and of a younger poet influenced by the Objectivists, Robert Creeley: "Creeley was, and still is I think, treading a tightrope from which it is easy to fall off on the one side into sentimentality, on the other side into preciousness. He hasn't, as far as I know, yet actually fallen off; but I think it's very likely, and the skips that a rope-dancer makes on his rope are not after all sufficiently varied to keep up the interest for as long as he is going on with the trick." <sup>84</sup>

In his letter to Zukofsky quoted above, Bunting praises Horace's skill with word order. Examples of this abound, but a particularly pleasing one appears in his description (in Ode IV of the First Book of Odes) of the Graces as they dance - "alternò terram quatunt pede" - where the positioning of "pede" in relation to its adjective helps the rhythm enact the placing of skipping feet. Later in the poem Horace's love of contrasts asserts by a similar trick, though with appropriately altered rhythm, the implacable power of death to move against rich and poor alike:

pallida Mors aequo pulsat pede pauperum tabernas  
regumque turres

As Bunting suggests in his letter, English syntax does not so easily permit such effects, but something similar can be achieved by skilful placing of emphatic words at the beginnings or ends of lines. This is obvious from Bunting's most recent translation from Horace: <sup>85</sup>

we must stare at that dark, slow  
drift and watch the damned  
toil while all they build  
tumbles back on them.

Most frequently, however, the linking of sound to sense is achieved through precise attention to detail of vowel and consonant within word or phrase, as in the onomatopoeic

Silver blades of surf  
fall crisp on rustling grit

(C.P., p.69)

To a certain extent the precision and economy of the phrasing here might be said to be a result of Bunting's work as a translator. By comparing part of his version of Ode XII from Horace's First Book of Odes with a standard prose translation of it (by C.E. Bennett for the Loeb Classical Library) it can be seen how much he has cut away to come to the tone of the original:

When thou, o Lydia, praisest Telephus' rosy neck, Telephus' waxen arms, alas! my burning heart swells with angry passion. Then my senses abide no more in their firm seat, nor does my colour remain unchanged, and the moist tear glides stealthily down my cheek, proving with what lingering fires I am inwardly consumed. I kindle with anger whether a quarrel waxing hot with wine has harmed thy gleaming shoulders, or the frenzied lad has with his teeth imprinted a lasting mark upon thy lips.

Please stop gushing about his pink  
neck smooth arms and so forth, Dulcie; it makes me sick,  
badtempered, silly: makes me blush.  
Dribbling sweat on my chops proves I'm on tenterhooks.  
- White skin bruised on a boozing bout,  
ungovernable cub certain to bite out a  
permanent memorandum on  
those lips.

(C.P., p.137)

To the objection that Bunting's version comes to Horace too obviously through Pound's Propertius, it might be countered that Horace was not the fool that the prose translation would seem to credit him to be. To the further objection that Bunting in evading the literal has failed to escape the constraint of twenties upper-middle-class diction (if bilingual puns are permissible then Dulcie - for sweetheart, Sweetie - might pass, but elsewhere the persona and diction veer uneasily from English gent to American tough guy) it could be said that time alone would bring improvement. In the most recent translation there is a pleasing generalisation of Horatian allusions as well as economy and a convincing evenness of tone:

nor can you tame death

not if you paid three hundred  
bulls every day that goes by  
to Pluto, who has no tears,  
who has dyked up

giants where we'll go aboard,  
we who feed on the soil,  
to cross, kings some, some  
penniless plowmen.

It is obvious that Bunting here is creating, as one often must for Horace, some stanza form that recalls the movement and progression of the original. Elsewhere, in his version of Ode XIII of the Third Book of Odes, there is some feeling, Victoria Forde has suggested, of the original Ionic metre. In both this ode and in the other early ode quoted above, however, the most effective feature is the surprising seriousness of the ending in contrast to the satirical opening:

when the driven tiger appears suddenly at arms'-length  
and

Only the thrice blessed are in love for life,  
we others are divorced at heart  
soon, soon torn apart by wretched bickerings

(C.P., pp. 136-137)

This love of contrasts almost for their own sake, the swift changes and twists of mood, and vocabulary, are what finally link Bunting and Horace. Ode 31 (C.P., p.116) shows such Horatian contrasts:

How glad  
you will be when the state takes your farm for  
arrears of taxes! No more cold daybreaks  
saffron under the barbed wire the east wind  
thrums, nor wet noons, nor starpinned nights! The choir  
of gnats is near a full-close.

But it is in the Sonatas, of course, that Bunting's love of contrasts appears most clearly as a structural principle.

Bunting and Horace, then, would be linked by like skill and interests. That Bunting's poetic interests are wide, however, means that the question of influence is not a simple one. Where Louis Zukofsky describes Ode 15

(C.P., p.101) as an "adaptation of classical quantitative measure to English," <sup>86</sup> Victoria Forde finds (op.cit., p.45) that "the strong stresses and even the alliteration in some lines echo Anglo-Saxon verse" -

and hewn hills and bristling forest,  
steadfast corn in its season.

We may say, then, that both influences may be strong in Bunting's verse, or alternatively that classical expertise cannot cancel out the native strength.

### "Wyat and Malherbe"

These poets are linked in Bunting's mind as men who wrote with music in mind, "writing for the accompanying notes of music." Wyatt in particular showed "astonishing fertility within a narrow convention." <sup>87</sup> Writing of Hugh MacDiarmid's lyrics in Scots, Bunting considered that in them "the sound is the sense, whatever a man with a dictionary may make of it, as in the best of the songs we inherited from Tudor poets as much musicians as poets." <sup>88</sup> In a more practical way, Bunting must have learned from Wyatt's rhythmical subtlety. In his English Verse: Voice and Movement from Wyatt to Yeats, T.R. Barnes has given interesting examples of this subtlety (pp.3-7) and shares Bunting's views on slavery to metre when he finds that "Wyatt is master of his rhythm, making it do as he wants; he is not subserviently tapping the poem out on his fingers, 'making it scan'." <sup>89</sup>

Malherbe also wrote for lute accompaniment, and Bunting considers that the French poet has influenced his own odes. He combined beauty of sound with open form (for singing) and clear syntax, his poems having "the air of the conversation of polite, educated people - but singable." <sup>90</sup> Bunting admires the polish of Malherbe's verses, the French poet's slow composition and immense care for revision having affinities with his own technique. Malherbe's subject matter "though now unfashionable was no



worse than any," and Bunting stresses that since the subjects of poetry are all conventional, Malherbe should not be condemned for this.

(Conventional elements in his own poetry are discussed at some length in the second part of this study.)

Malherbe was, after Horace, Bunting's "other first spur,"<sup>91</sup> and the similarities between himself and the French poet extend not only to such general qualities as the conception of the poet as craftsman rather than prophet, the critical principles of verbal harmony, propriety and intelligibility, the monumental strength of the best poems, in Baudelaire's words "un vers de Malherbe, symétrique et carré de mélodie,"<sup>92</sup> but even in one case to an imitation of metrical form.

"From the welter of metrical forms, Malherbe chose the 10-line strophe of 5-syllable lines, ... and by increasing the number of syllables to eight, Malherbe transformed it into an instrument of incomparable harmony."<sup>93</sup>

Bunting employs Malherbe's form in Ode 34 and achieves a degree of this harmony as well as propriety and monumental strength. The poem is itself a monument to the first phase of his development.

These tracings from a world that's dead  
take for my dust-smothered pyramid.  
Count the sharp study and long toil  
as pavements laid for worms to soil.  
You without knowing it may tread  
the grass where my foundation's laid,  
your, or another's, house be built  
where my weathered stones lie spilt,  
and this unread memento be  
the only lasting part of me.

(C.P., p.119)

More generally the names of Wyatt and Malherbe remind us that during this formative phase Bunting's poetic method was influenced by ideas arising from his study of Elizabethan music, composed in an age when music and poetry were interlinked in a particularly close way.

In Chapter V of Elizabethan Poetry (1968), Hallett Smith has

discussed the effect of contemporary musical methods, particularly of madrigal composition and performance, on the delicacy and subtlety of Elizabethan versification: "the poet who saw his words being treated in such a fashion, with complexities of meaning and attitude conveyed by complexities of rhythm, could not fail to profit by the musical example and thereafter to exploit the same methods in his verse" (p.264). The melody and harmony of Elizabethan poetry was also influenced by musical skills which interpreted the mood and feelings of words; this led to a new rhythmic and tonal imitation of the kind that Bunting admires also in Horace's poetry.

It will be remembered that Bunting praised the rhythmical complexity of Byrd and Dowland to Zukofsky (above p.24). His chief sources of information, and Hallett Smith's, were the works of Dr. Fellowes (whom he mentions in Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal): William Byrd, The English Madrigal, English Madrigal Composers, English Madrigal Verse. While one cannot be sure exactly how many of these texts Bunting studied, his own thoroughness, eagerness, and ability to read scores by sight at the period of his life when he was a music critic, make it almost certain that the influence of complex madrigal rhythms on his ear would have been to develop that sensitivity got by Elizabethan poets from the same source.

Despite the mention of madrigal in the second line of 'Briggflatts', however, it is the techniques of the "ayre" for single voice which are more appropriate to Bunting's method. His use of the sonata for single voices he opposes to the more complex structures, akin to the fugue, employed by Pound and Zukofsky:

The fugue is something which depends on a number of melodies being heard simultaneously. Now in poetry, which is only one voice, that is not possible; all you can do is to have something which suggests a fugue. It's the same problem that Bach set himself when he wrote fugues for the unaccompanied violin .... it is obviously impossible to play a fugue on an unaccompanied violin, but you can make something which sounds rather as though

it were a fugue, you know, and which produces a number of the same effects; and these unaccompanied fugues of Bach's are, I know, very, very familiar to Zukofsky. <sup>94</sup>

Not the multi-voiced madrigal, then, with different words sung by different voices at the same time, nor the analogous fugue, but the single melodic line of the "ayre", a one part song with lute accompaniment, may have had the major influence on Bunting's style. In this regard, the neo-classicism of the lyrics of Campion and Jonson, with their exploitation of quantitative values in English verse, may as much account for that strangely impersonal and inconsequential beauty of some of Bunting's odes as the quality of impersonal, simple and lucid freshness in the Elizabethan lyric considered by Hallett Smith to derive "from the fact that it owes its birth to music, that the music which was felt to adhere to it sharpened the emotional stress ..." (p.267).

Given his own experience and aims, Bunting cannot fail to have taken note of the example of Campion, who selfconsciously attempted to unite music and poetry. In the preface to A Booke of Ayres (1601), Campion stresses the economy of the ayre: "What Epigrams are in Poetrie, the same are Ayres in musicke, then in their chief perfection when they are short and well-seasoned." <sup>95</sup> Within the short compass of the ayre, Campion demonstrates great rhythmical variety, with a care and sensitivity in the manipulation of vowel sounds of an order that one seems to hear again in such early lines of Bunting's verse as these:

Loud intolerant bells (the shrinking nightflower closes  
tenderly round its stars to baulk their hectoring)

(C.P., p.94)

Here the age-old debate between town and country, man and nature, is enacted almost as much through the sounds of the vowels as through the sense of the words: the bold opening sounds of the bells fade and lighten as the delicate but powerful pressure of the plant towards self protection is carried increasingly on the stronger vowels.

In a general way, then, one would note a sense of harmony between Bunting's approach to his art and the Elizabethan poet's: a commonplace theme is exploited through new rhythmical complexity, and intensified through musical effects of harmonic and melodic display. It is a shared attitude also to life: as kindred spirit Bunting chooses Sir Walter Raleigh who "did a mass variety of things, did them all well ..." <sup>96</sup>

Yeats, who encountered Bunting while visiting Pound at Rapallo, would have found the comparison apt. Writing to Olivia Shakspear in March 1929, he described "a certain Basil Bunting, one of Ezra's more savage disciples. He got into jail as a pacifist and then for assaulting the police and carrying concealed weapons, and he is now writing up Antille's music. George and I keep him at a distance and yet I have no doubt that just such as he surrounded Shakespeare's theatre, when it was denounced by the first puritans." <sup>97</sup>

#### "Manuchehri and Ferdosi"

Some effects of the encounter with Islamic culture on Bunting and his art have been suggested in Chapter II. The particular influence of individual poets, even of the two whom he names in his Preface, is more difficult to judge, especially when one lacks detailed knowledge of the original language and texts. Yet some examination of his aims and his achievement in those few translations which he has chosen to include in Collected Poems is necessary and informative.

Writing to Pound in 1951, Bunting was modest about his aims:

But I'm not hoping for honour and glory, nor expecting to make a living, nor even hoping for translation good enough to approve of: just texts and cribs so that a chap who wants to get at the stuff can. So that another generation may not have quite as many cursed vexations as ours when it sets out to acquire knowledge. <sup>98</sup>

If this were his sole aim, it would explain why some of the translations seem not to measure up even to the second standard of translation outlined

earlier by Bunting in his review article on modern translation, published in The Criterion in 1936: "works in their own language equivalent to their original but not compelled to lean on its authority, claiming the independence and accepting the responsibility inseparable from a life of their own." 99

The modesty of his aim would suggest, further, that he chose to omit from Collected Poems some of his previously published versions - 'Night is hard by, I am vexed and bothered by sleep' and 'You there, with my enemy, strolling down my street' (above, Chapter II, note 43) - as being simply inadequate as poetry. Of the first of these versions, a translation of a ghazal by Manuchehri, he admitted to Zukofsky that "the characteristic of the original is vigour, which has evaporated in the translation and I don't know how to get it back." 100

On the other hand, the fact that a poet as exacting in his standards as Bunting should consent to have "inferior" work published, even as a crib, might suggest some deeper personal involvement in Persian poetry. This in itself would not be surprising, given the admiration for Persian life and attitudes apparent in his letters, and the emotional link with the people brought by a Persian wife and the adoption of her language as the language of his household.

Such involvement might also explain his (one presumes) excessive praise of Manuchehri to Zukofsky:

Manuchehri? Haven't I ever pestered you with him? If one puts Homer and Firdosi carefully in one place and then looks for the three or four greatest poets remaining I don't see how anyone who has the luck to read him can omit Manuchehri. His variety is enormous and everything he did he did better than anyone else. You want the directness of some Catullus? Go to Manuchehri. You want the swiftness of Anacreon? Manuchehri. The elaborate music of Spenser? Go to Manuchehri. The formal, full dress ode with every circumstance of sublimity and splendour? Not Pinder, Manuchehri. Satire direct and overwhelming, Manuchehri all alone - no competitor." 101

Yet even before arriving in Persia, Bunting had praised this poet's "wonderful transitions. And his observation of deer and flowers and camel

drivers and girls. The tulips that 'are a row of parrots asleep with their head under their wings'" (May Day 1939).<sup>102</sup> That is, he found early in his study of Persian literature the qualities of variety, sudden contrasts and clarity of imagery which were already his interest in Western poetry, ancient and modern.

Variety is of essence in Persian poetry. In the quasida of Manuchehri (C.P., p.143) one can detect a traditional framework in which the basic unit is a distich (bayt) consisting of two balanced halves (misra) connected by parallelism in thought, harmony of images and so forth. Each bayt being considered independent, there is often little of Western logic in the connections beyond the basic unit. A monorhyme is introduced in both halves of the opening bayt and is repeated thereafter in the second half of each succeeding unit.

The test of ingenious rhyming may remind one of Bunting's early discipline of composing villanelles, and certainly his translation of Persian poetry was a constant exercise of poetic skills during years of apparent silence. In answer to some enquiries from Zukofsky on the following lines from 'The Spoils',

at night after prayers recite the sacred  
enscrolled poems, beating with a leaping measure  
like blood in a new wound:  
These were the embers . . . Halt, both, lament . . . :

(C.P., pp.38-39)

Bunting pointed to the inadequacies of current translations:

The mo' allaghat . . . were written in highly ornamented character on gilded scrolls to be hung at Mecca. "Halt, both lament . . . " tries to give the Arabic dual while preserving the abruptness of that most celebrated opening, which is currently rendered (O ye Muses!) "Praise, O ye two, and let us bewail . . . " (13 March 1951)

In the same letter Bunting adds that the moon-silver pool on the sand-pale gold of the desert in the following lines of the poem "is an imitation of Manuchehri's imitation of another line of this famous and

lovely poem." The interconnections of image and technique between Bunting and Persian poetry, then, are likely to be as subtle and various as interlinkings customarily are in that poetry.

The element of poetic technique is the more open to examination. Bunting's translation of the quasida of Manuchehri reveals that for the original monorhyme he substitutes a subtle blend of internal and external rhyme, or half-rhyme, and parallelism: "double heart/  
singlehearted; torment... instant/content, content; bleached . . .  
Bleached; string . . . sing; kindled . . . Kindle/ kindled candle; "  
and so forth.

Again, in his translation of a ghazal ("a lover's exchange") of Sa'di, Bunting overrides the long lines of the original so that the enjambment aptly expresses the surging passion of the lover's grief:

That was  
not wine I drank from your sight but my heart's  
blood gushing into the cup. Wall and door wherever  
I turned my eyes scored and decorated with shapes  
of you.

(C.P., p.145)

In his own poetry the influence of such techniques is possibly discernible in the opening lines of 'The Spoils', where the theme of Eastern values is carried on an Eastern poetic of balanced line and half line:

marking the register, listening to their lies,  
a bushel of dried apricots, marking the register,  
three rolls of Egyptian cloth, astute in their avarice.

(C.P., p.37)

Yet the influence of the techniques of Persian poetry was, I think, less important than its impact on Bunting in a personal sense, allowing the suppressed lyrical element in him scope after a decade from 1925 to 1935, roughly, when ironic elements preponderate, and also during the following decade of almost total public silence during which he translated many passages from the Shahnamah: these were included in his

letters to Zukofsky during this time (one wonders what he made of it all).

Through Persian poetry Bunting found it possible to express emotions that would not work elsewhere, but which were surely close to his own convictions, as they have emerged in his later poetry:

Bright wine and the sight of a gracious face,  
 dear it might cost but always cheap to me.  
 My purse was my heart, my heart bursting with words,  
 and the title page of my book was Love and Poetry.

(C.P., p.141)

This translation from Rudaki is dated 1948: the fourth line may, if encountered earlier than this date, have influenced the "page/ ripped from Love's ledger and Poetry's" of Section IV of 'The Well of Lycopolis', yet what is noticeable is the contrast between the attitudes of the personae, as the "bright wine" of Persia replaces the "half-quartern of gin" and the "libation of flat beer" of the earlier work, and the old poet, albeit toothless, still enjoys the company of a beautiful young woman, a world away from Venus's "Blotched belly, slack buttock and breast", and the self-mockery of the young man cuckolded by sun and wind and sea.

This change of attitude is clearly at work in the two post-war odes (35 and 36 in "First book of Odes") written out of the immediate experience of war and the East: there is an opening of the heart, firstly, to the innocent victim of war, the sick child,

for whom no kindness is,  
 to whom caress and kiss  
 come nightly more amiss,  
 whose hand no gentle hand  
 touches, whose eyes withstand  
 compassion.

(C.P., p.120)

Secondly, there is in Ode 36 the enthusiastic celebration of the power of art, symbolised through the sacred imagery of Islamic architecture.



For a changed attitude, an appropriate change of form shortens the line length and employs, probably under the influence of Persian poetics already discussed, rhyme and half-rhyme in a new and emphatic way.

In Bunting's earliest translation from the Persian we find also an interesting adoption of a poetic persona foreshadowing the "prophet" voice - by turns ironical, stoic, bardic, lyrical - of 'Briggflatts',

Age claps a stick in my bridle-hand:  
substance spent, health broken,  
forgotten the skill to swerve aside from the joust  
with spearhead grazing my eyelashes.

(C.P., p.140)

From this to the late comparison of an old man to the ancient stag whose "feet lift lightly/with mere memory of gentler seasons"

(C.P., p.128) seems a short step, yet is thirty years.

It is a persona and a voice which Bunting had employed shortly before this in 'Chomei at Toyama' (1932) and his encounter with Firdosi parallels his meeting with the Japanese writer and throws light on Bunting's aims in poetry.

He had found on a secondhand book stall on the quays at Genoa a translation into Italian of the 'Hojoki', and having turned that very successfully into a poem, he returned to have another search for material. On this occasion he found an incomplete copy of a 19th century prose translation into French of Firdosi's epic, and caught up in the story, learned Persian in order to complete a tale which ended in the middle with the education of Zal and the birth of Rustum.

This account in itself illustrates the central occupation of Bunting's life - an unremitting search for traditional material to fill new poetic structures, and for a kind of poetry he would not in fact achieve for another thirty years; so that with Firdosi he could say:

I ask the just Creator  
 so much refuge from Time  
 that a tale of mine may remain in the world  
 from this famous book of the ancients  
 and they who think of such matters weighing their words  
 think of that only when they think of me.

(C.P., p.140)

Whether Bunting created from Firdosi, as he certainly did from Chomei, a new persona who speaks in a far wider range of tones than the historical writer, I am not qualified to judge. The translations included in his letters to Zukofsky were never published, possibly because they failed to measure up to Bunting's ideal of the excellence of the original. The single passage from Firdosi published in The Criterion in 1936,<sup>103</sup> however, reveals, whatever its merits as poetry, something of what Bunting found in that poet: apart from the force of the story telling (a poetic skill which, as we have seen in his estimation of Wordsworth, he values highly) there is the evocation of a sublime moment of grief and suffering, and it is just such a sublimity which Bunting has sought to achieve in his own poetry in a form suited to twentieth century taste.

Finally, the use of musical accompaniment to classical Persian singing has had its influence.

Taj is to sing, Taj  
 when tar and drum  
 come to their silence, slow,  
 clear, rich, as though  
 he had cadence and phrase from Hafez.

(C.P., pp. 42-43)

In a letter to Zukofsky he notes that both the tar (a stringed instrument played with bow and pizzicato) and the nay (nose-flute) "are in use, apart and together, in unison and in a kind of counterpoint, as . . . the preface and coda and intermezzo of classical singing."<sup>104</sup> Such a use of music has probably influenced him in his performances of 'Briggflatts' to an accompaniment of sonatas of Scarlatti played between

each section of the poem.

As any poet will, Bunting unites diverse aspects of his life and art. In sending Zukofsky a copy of the poem "attributed, probably wrongly, to Sa'di" (Bunting credits the "much earlier and greater poet Unsuri") he wrote: "This last poem is song in fullest sense: hope my rendering would be singable. Last line a bit Jacobean, lute cadences all ready for it." <sup>105</sup>

How sweetly you will sing what I so sadly write.

(C.P., p.145)

In Persian poetry, then, Bunting found "conceits" enough to occupy an ear already attuned to the subtleties of Elizabethan and Jacobean versification, and poets in plenty who, like himself, sought to demonstrate their skill within the conventions. In his attitudes to life and to art Bunting found himself remarkably at home among the Persian poets, and there is perhaps more coherence of tone and form between these translations and his own poems than might at first sight be supposed.

#### "Villon"

In the lean years of the early fifties, after his expulsion from Persia, Bunting unsuccessfully attempted to obtain a post in American universities as a Persian scholar. Yet as Kenneth Cox has pointed out with regard to Bunting and Villon, both men are in a sense spoiled scholars who keep of their learning "only so much as stays in the mind after its exposure to experience." <sup>106</sup>

As a young man Bunting translated and incorporated lines and images from Villon in his poem of the same name: the "mouldy bread" and "dry crust" in the opening lines of Section II of 'Villon', for instance, allude to lines in 'Ballade pour laquelle Villon crye mercy a chascun',

and the vanished dancers and somersaulters recall lines in 'Epistre, en forme de ballade, a ses amis', The list of "borrowings" and transmutations could be extended,<sup>107</sup> even to his other poems: the regrets of Venus quoted above from 'The Well of Lycopolis', for example, recall those of la belle Heaulmiere for her lost youth.

Bunting doubtless learned something of the "trick" of poetry from this work, but as with his debt to Malherbe, one is struck by more general similarities between the English and the French poet. Though their crimes were different, Bunting was certainly able to universalize his own prison experience by linking it with that of "the hardest, the most authentic, the most absolute poet of France": Pound's words here are relevant, of course, not only to the persona Bunting has recreated in 'Villon' but also to that of other poems:

I hear Aneurin number the dead and rejoice,  
being adult male of a merciless species.

(C.P., p.65)

The acceptance of death here, at least in so far as it is redeemed by the art which the Welsh poet makes of it, contrasts with Villon's pre-occupation with the horror of old age and death, but reminds us that the same conflict between the claims of art and death shapes the thematic structure of Bunting's earliest Sonata. In the Sonatas which followed, as in his life following release from jail, Bunting explored in some detail Villon's unromantic world of poverty, cold and vice, with occasional escapes into a cynical humour also reminiscent of the medieval poet. They share a sly but pointed wit, but behind it there often lies a controlled pathos and poignancy:

Sixteen great officials lost houses and  
very many poor.

. . . . .

The pest bred.

That winter my fuel was the walls of my own house.

(C.P., pp. 76-77)

In Villon, then, Bunting found a voice and a personality which in his early years he felt akin to his own: a serious concern with last things expressed itself in a perkiness of tone which must have been attractive enough to a poverty-stricken young poet who mingled scholarly inclinations with a desire to sail near the wind. Being jailed for drunk and disorderly conduct in Paris (Pound bailed him out) and the carrying of an offensive weapon, though shocking to Yeats, hardly put Bunting in Villon's league, yet there was at least a similar tendency to defy the conventions. But this was an attitude and a persona that Bunting outgrew, and as a whole the influence of Villon on Bunting's poetry has been less enduring than that of another poet whom he read early, Walt Whitman.

#### "Whitman"

From what we know of Bunting's life, the attraction of a "sunburnt" poet like Whitman who showed a like regard for sheer variety of experience, should be obvious:

... Of every hue and cast am I, of every rank and religion,  
A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,  
Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.

('Song of Myself' 16)

Bunting's stress on firsthand experience may mean that often an apparently "literary" reference has its origin in his own life: "scarabs are scurrying rolling dung" (C.P., p.37), for example, does not derive directly from Whitman's "beetles rolling balls of dung" ('Song of Myself' 24), but, as a letter to Zukofsky on 3 March 1951 makes clear, from his own observations in the desert.<sup>108</sup> This is not to deny that some echo of Whitman's line may still have rung in Bunting's retentive memory, yet the contrast he makes between the basis of his own verse in experience and of Zukofsky's in books<sup>109</sup> is on the whole a

valid one.

Bunting discovered in Whitman, fairly early I believe, and as a counterweight to late nineteenth century romanticism, that "a perfect user of words uses things," <sup>110</sup> and this has become a staple of his poetic practice. Bunting does not, in F.O. Matthiessen's phrase, take Whitman's "joy of the child or of the primitive poet just in naming things," <sup>111</sup> nor does he adopt the American's long lists; his distaste for watery mysticism and for "regressive infantile fluidity," <sup>112</sup> together with the influence on him of an aesthetic of craftsmanship deriving at least in part from Whitman's compatriots, Poe and Pound, has meant that in Bunting's poetry mere identification of the poet with an object does not constitute an adequate expression of it.

Rather Bunting is often less concerned to celebrate what he sees than to concentrate and probe its significance - as in these "Whitmanesque" lines from 'The Spoils', for example:

A fancy took me to dig,  
plant, prune, graft;  
milk, skim, churn;  
flay and tan.  
A side of salt beef  
for a knife chased and inscribed.  
A cask of pressed grapes  
for a seine-net.

(C.P., p.45)

While the predominantly monosyllabic and basically three stress line here obviously reinforces the theme of a simple society based on timeless and practical skills, one notes that this simple bartering leads directly in the poem to a situation which is fraught with conflict:

How shall wheat sprout  
through a shingle of Lydian pebbles  
that turns the harrow's points?

(C.P., p.45)

the repeated "Lydian pebbles" being (perhaps not obviously enough) symbols of "the tribute exacted by the greedy and powerful". <sup>113</sup>

The development of themes inherent in the sonata form, then, and an adherence to Pound's conviction that "you can move a reader only through clarity of emotion which is inseparable from precision of thought," <sup>114</sup> has meant that the dissimilarities between Bunting and Whitman are as marked as the similarities. Yet the similarities are profound, both in outlook and technique. There is, obviously, a similar concentration on the near and steady contemplation of objects. There is a shared sense of the need for a certain earthiness, Whitman's view that "we are all lost without redemption, except we retain the sexual fibre of things" being shared in Bunting's remark on this aspect of Eastern culture to Zukofsky (above p.32).

A more intriguing connection of ideas between the two is suggested by F.O. Matthiessen's remark that for Whitman a "a particular kind of material ideality, suggestive in general of Fichte's, remains his dominant thought." <sup>115</sup> This outlook, revealed in the following line from 'Starting from Paumanok',

I will make the poems of materials, for I think they are to be  
the most spiritual poems

may have had an influence on that mixture of objectivity and sublimity which, I have suggested, is a marked feature of Bunting's poetry.

Whitman himself attributed his views in part to his mixed heritage in which, as in Bunting's early life, Quakerism played an important role (with the Dutch, in Whitman's case): "like the Quakers, the Dutch are very practical and materialistic . . . but are terribly transcendental and cloudy too." <sup>116</sup> Whitman's freedom from "the pale cast of intellectualism," his "placid benevolence" as well as his "unconventionality and plainness," and "the Quakers' passivity [which] allowed the growth of an undisturbed depth of emotion - 'the lull I like'" were all, Matthiessen suggests (pp. 538-539), the results of a Quaker upbringing

which must have had a similar effect on Bunting: at any rate, one encounters all these qualities in Ode 22, 'Mesh cast for mackerel' (C.P., p.109) in a conveniently concentrated form, or in these lines from a recent poem (to be published in the new edition of Collected Poems) written from the experience of returning to the place of worship of his childhood, 'At Briggflatts meetinghouse':

Stones indeed sift to sand, oak  
blends with the saints' bones.  
Yet for a little longer here  
stone and oak shelter

silence while we ask nothing  
but silence. Look how clouds dance  
under the wind's wing, and leaves  
delight in transience.

Apart from such similarities of outlook, Bunting would have found in Whitman a congenial emphasis on a poetry of the spoken word; on the power of music and of the singing voice as an analogy for poetry (although Whitman's passion was, characteristically, for the operatic aria, and Bunting's for choral harmonies or the more delicate ayre); and, probably most influential of all, on the imagery of sailing and the sea. The phrase in Bunting's Preface, "the trick of it," may well echo Whitman's lines to the sea:

These, these, O sea, all these I'd gladly barter,  
Would you the undulation of one wave, its trick to me transfer,  
Or breathe one breath of yours upon my verse  
And leave its odour there. 117

Even although in this context Bunting is claiming to have learned his skill from books rather than from life, he has, like Whitman, haunted the sea shore, "that suggesting, dividing line, contact, junction, the solid marrying the liquid - that curious lurking something (as doubtless every objective form becomes to the subjective spirit,) ..." 118 and the imagery of shore and tide haunts every one of the Sonatas except 'Aus dem Zweiten Reich', as if the shore were for him, too, "an



invisible influence, a pervading gauge and tally" <sup>119</sup> in his composition, and the sea one measure of the organic basis of poetic rhythm:

Silver blades of surf  
fall crisp on rustling grit,  
shaping the shore as a mason  
fondles and shapes his stone.

(C.P., p.69)

The imagery of the final voyage and the tone of Section V and the Coda of 'Briggflatts' may well owe something to the late poems of Whitman, in particular to "Fancies At Navesink", of which the lines to the sea quoted above form a part. In 'You Tides With Ceas<sup>l</sup>ess Swell', for instance, we find Whitman wondering, as Bunting does,

What the messages by you from distant stars to us? what  
Sirius'? what Capella's?

The balance of a sense of impending death with a sense of rebirth, significance or continuity at this point in Bunting's poem is similarly caught in Whitman's 'Last of Ebb, and Daylight Waning' and 'And Yet Not You Alone', and the whole work seems summed up in 'By That Long Scan of Waves' - the intention, the motivation, the "philosophy" and the tone:

Myself through every by-gone phase - my idle youth - old age  
at hand,  
My three-score years of life summ'd up, and more, and  
past,  
By any grand ideal tried, intentionless, the whole a nothing,  
And haply yet some drop within God's scheme's ensemble -  
some wave or part of wave,  
Like one of yours, ye multitudinous ocean.

The question of borrowing, direct or indirect, is less important here than the strong sense we have of Bunting deliberately placing himself and his own vision for judgment beside the "greatest bards" of the past, as Whitman does in 'Had I the Choice'.

A final connection between Bunting and Whitman is their prosodic form. S.V.M. Forde has noted Whitmanesque syntactical parallelisms in 'Villon':

They have melted the snows from Erebus, weighed the clouds,  
hunted down the white bear, hunted the whale the seal the kangaroo...

(C.P., p.16)

Parallelism or "thought rythm" is the basic prosodic form in Whitman, as it is in ancient Hebraic verse, "though he may not have got it directly from the Bible." <sup>120</sup> The line is the unit, and the second line balances the first, completing or supplementing its meaning.

Bunting frequently uses this form:

Applewood, hard to rive,  
its knots smoulder all day.  
Cobweb hair on the morning,  
a puff would blow it away.  
Rime is crisp on the bent,  
ruts stone-hard, frost spangles fleece.

(C.P., p.66)

In Bunting's verse the influence of the Bible is certainly there, but the northern and literary origins of the word bent <sup>121</sup> serve to remind us of the strong native Anglo-Saxon tradition which is there too, and of the parallelism of Old English verse. The Persian balancing of half line against half line has also been mentioned, so that it appears that although the Bible and Whitman took precedence in time, the other influences combined throughout Bunting's career to reinforce the original choice of prosodic form, by now so deep-rooted as to seem almost instinctive.

#### "Edmund Spenser"

In conversation with Robert Creeley, Bunting found Ezra Pound parallel to Spenser in that both men opened up an encyclopaedia of possibilities for those who came after. <sup>122</sup> In the meantime interview he draws out the parallel, noting the amount of "concentrated experiment" there is in The Shepheardes Calender and in Pound's early work. His mention of this poem may serve to remind us of the strain of pastoral imagery which flows through Bunting's poetry, early and late:

in Odes 8 and 18 from "First Book of Odes", and, in the Sonatas, the "chaffered for lambs" in 'Attis' Section III, the "sterile ram, weakly hogg to the flock" in 'The Spoils' Section I, and in the shepherds and ewes of 'Briggflatts' Section V. And indeed the many general similarities between 'Briggflatts' and The Shepheardes Calender might suggest that this poem had a particular and influential appeal.

There is, firstly, the general cyclical structure shared by both poems, wherein each poet-hero "proportioneth his life to the foure seasons of the yeare, comparing hys youthe to the spring time, when he was fresh and free from loues follye. His manhoode to the somer, which he sayth, was consumed with greate heate and excessiue drouth ... His riper yeares hee resembleth to an vnseasonable harueste ... His latter age to winters chyll and frostie season now drawing neare to his last ende." <sup>123</sup> (In Bunting's case, of course, "loues follye", the "sore hart roote,/ Whose rankling wound as yet does rifelye bleede" in Section II of 'Briggflatts', is of his own rather than Cupid's doing; he is "self-maimed"). Consequent upon the seasonal structure, there is in both poems the extended simile linking the hero's state with the world of nature around him, or rather, in Hallett Smith's words, "it is a mirror situation; the comparison between object and image extends both ways, and each has its validity .... It is impossible to keep the position of the shepherd, for he is sometimes only a reflection of nature; it is impossible to keep the point of view of nature, for it is often only a reflection of the moods and feelings of the shepherd. The result is a kind of 'distance' or objectivity ..." <sup>124</sup>

Both Bunting and Spenser are also interested in variety of texture and their new versions of pastoral include one characteristic style which is, as in the 'moral' eclogues, "rough, uncouth, non-lyrical and full of [northern] dialect words." <sup>125</sup> One thinks of Bunting's dialect

poems, but also of the admixture of social criticism or political satire in Section II of 'Briggflatts', and of the diverse form, dialect words and interesting texture of Section IV.

Desire for variety meant that both poets explored and exploited contemporary foreign models: as Spenser went to French and Italian in the sixteenth century, so Bunting went to Pound and Eliot in the twentieth, the American mode having become the vital force with which English poetry had to come to terms if it was to avoid the dangers of insularity and develop in fruitful ways.

In so doing, Bunting did not ignore the English tradition. Rather he used it as a means of education: as surely the disparagement of "the French Poete Marot (if he be worthy of the name of a Poete)" in the Glosse for 'January' and the Argument for 'November' in The Shepheardes Calender must have led him to the original French and thence to the inanity of Marot's verdict on Villon which opens Bunting's poem of that name: "whose words we gathered as pleasant flowers/ and thought on his wit and how neatly he describes things" (C.P., p.13).

An education of his readers is thus also entailed and Bunting's Notes and E.K.'s Glosses are similarly mixed blessings (the ironic obscurity of the one matching the errors and confusions of the other) which yet both seem attempts at a conscious enriching of the cultural life of the time.

Such similarities are general, no doubt, but when one encounters near the start of Spenser's poem too a "brag ... Bullocke" ('February' 1.71), the question of more particular influence arises. While the month here does not correspond to Bunting's calender, the following eclogue repeats "bragly" in the context of "Hawthorne ... flower ... Maias" ('March' ll. 13-17) which recalls "May on the bull's hide" in 'Briggflatts' Section I.

Behind correspondence of line or image lies an identity of theme. In both poems, the symbolic significance of poetry is very great. Hallett Smith notes Spenser's development in the plaintive and moral eclogues "toward a self-conscious emphasis on poetry" <sup>126</sup> so that finally "there is not a core of something wrapped up in a covering of pastoral, but...the pastoral idea, in its various ramifications, is the Calender." This aspect of Spenser's poem would have been very congenial to Bunting who from the start has been concerned with the nature and function of the poetic act, and in 'Briggflatts' he develops towards a notion of the poet's responsibility very similar to Spenser's in the 'October' eclogue. In Bunting the notion is expressed through style rather than statement, nevertheless the idea that "the poet should turn to heroic poetry, celebrating deeds of greatness and becoming the spokesman for the national spirit" <sup>127</sup> emerges clearly enough in the references to Aneurin and Taliesin, to harp, shield and horn in Sections IV and V. (Bunting is, however, spokesman for a Northern rather than a national spirit.) The relation between Colin's love poetry, divine inspiration and heavenly music may also be relevant to Bunting's tone and to his imagery of starlight linked with love in the final pages of his poem.

The particular influence of the 'October' eclogue is most marked, however, on Section IV of 'Briggflatts'. The eclogue's central question of the moral value of poetry has become more problematic in our time: if Spenser knew that "yet is Princes pallace the most fitt" (l.81) for "pierlesse Poesye" to find its place, Bunting recognises that for all his own efforts to create a substantial modern structure from a traditional base,

Today's posts are piles to drive into the quaggy past  
on which impermanent palaces balance.

(C.P., p.65)

Yet Bunting does manage to balance in Section IV (the core of his poem as 'October' is of Spenser's) a marvellous variety and span of tone and reference, some of it Spenserian. The imagery of weaving ("web", "shuttles") may owe something to 'October' (l.102); and its riddling significance, "Follow the clue patiently and you will understand nothing," may derive from the meaning of the Embleme to this eclogue, "that Poetry is a divine instinct and vnnatural rage passing the reache of comon reason." References in the Glosse to Alexander as a lover of poetry help explain his manifestation as a poetic hero in Section III. The reference to Orpheus and Eurydice reminds us that from the hellish vision of "Lice" and "walls of flame" Bunting proceeds through a marvellous evocation of the power of music over the natural world to the rescue of a love who "is young but wise" from what ought to have been the dead ashes of a relationship, but

Oak, applewood  
her fire is banked with ashes till day.

Yet fate and human frailty decreed that love would not prevail. In the final lines of the section Bunting substitutes for Cuddie's inspiration through wine a view of himself as the poet in an ironic age who can only

Shamble, cold, content with beer and pickles,  
towards a taciturn lodging among strangers.

The section ends with a momentary quickening of response to the "valiant" rat, but, as in Spenser, the "corage cooles ere it be warme," and the mood subsides into resignation or humility:

Stars disperse. We too,  
further from neighbours  
now the year ages.

By this stage, however, Bunting has shown what versions of pastoral are still possible now, and how its central humanistic concerns with the relative value of power and wealth, poetry, love and the 'contented mind'

are still current and valid for English poetry. This would obviously have been impossible without his knowledge and love of Spenser's images and forms. The further influence of the body of imagery from The Faerie Queene will be discussed later.

"Ezra Pound, and, in his sterner, stonier way, Louis Zukofsky."

The encyclopaedia of possibilities opened up by Pound enabled Bunting to develop more quickly along several lines which he had already begun to explore. The rather unhurried and dogged quality seen in Bunting's personal development, in his process of composition, and even line by line rhythms, meant that neither Pound's showman nor his shaman costume sat as easily on Bunting's shoulders as he might then have wished; this is one cause of the uneven effect of 'Attis' and 'The Well of Lycopolis'. Yet although Bunting left Rapallo to follow his own road, he continued to develop in central areas which had been sketched out by an intelligence at once more analytic and more diverse than his own: firstly, translation and revision as a means of sharpening poetic skill; next, the three "kinds" of poetry - logopoeia, phanopoeia, and melopoeia; lastly, the problem of building an epic structure in an age of shifting values and perspectives.

Translation and revision came together most clearly in Pound's pruning of 'Villon' in Paris in 1923, and Bunting's subsequent careful avoidance of redundancy in form and language. The emphasis on translation at Rapallo encouraged him to increase his knowledge and skills by active engagement with a variety of literary cultures: from the time of his first visit in 1924, through the period from 1929 to 1933 when he was settled more or less permanently there, come translations or 'Overdrafts' of Lucretius, Horace, Catullus, Machiavelli and Firdosi, as well as Ode 20 'Vestiges', and 'Chomei at Toyama' with their Far

Eastern background.

Bunting first encountered Pound, in a sense, through translation. It was his 'Homage to Sextus Propertius' - "the finest of modern poems" - that gave Bunting "the notion that poetry wasn't altogether impossible in the XX century."<sup>128</sup> The poem itself is an example of what Pound meant by logopoeia, "the dance of the intellect among words," more clearly defined by J.P. Sullivan in the following terms: "Essentially it consists of a highly self-conscious and ironic use of words or quotations, in which the tone and imagery range disconcertingly from the elevated to the vulgar; these verbal techniques are largely designed to frustrate our standard literary responses.... It is at bottom a satiric mode, which does not of course preclude its use for highly serious and profound statements."<sup>129</sup>

Bunting's enthusiasm for this mode came from within his own character rather than from his admiration for Pound. His love of the contrasts employed by earlier poets has already been discussed; and the man who seems in contrast with Pound more steady and pragmatic in his observations, - a "slow wit" as he describes himself then,<sup>130</sup> a "slowworm" as he terms himself in 'Briggflatts' - was also given to starts of bravado and of enthusiasm, as for Persian literature: Yeats was struck by the bravado, the children of his first marriage - Bourtai, Rondaba and Rustum - by the latter quality.

The ready availability of such a model logopoeic voice as that of Pound's Propertius was not altogether a healthy thing for Bunting's poetry. Often he adopts Poundian mannerisms, the "teashop girls" of Ode 22, 'Mesh cast for mackerel', reminding us of 'The Teashop' from Lustra,<sup>131</sup> and the first words in Ode 4 in "Second Book of Odes" - "You idiot!" - suggesting that even in 1965 the influence of 'Propertius' echoed on. Such examples of Pound compounded may be rather irritating



to the reader who goes to Bunting for what he alone brings to "the dance of the intellect among words" - a new sense of form which still gives room for contrasting movements and free expression.

Bunting's success in expression depends partly on a stress on clear images, or *phanopoeia*. It is noteworthy that Pound himself in his later years accepted the validity of Bunting's criticism of the method of the Cantos: "...my poems don't make sense... A lot of double talk.... Basil Bunting told me that the Cantos refer, but they do not present." <sup>132</sup> Yet Bunting here was merely reminding Pound of his own early dictum: "When Shakespeare talks of the 'Dawn in russet mantle clad'... [there] is in this line of his nothing that one can call description; he presents." <sup>133</sup> In 1932 he praised Pound's stress on facts, his "pervading stress on the immediate, the particular, the concrete; distrust of abstractions... It will build with facts, declines to soar with inevitably unsteady words." <sup>134</sup> As we have seen, however, his own psychological development (his father's scientific experimentation, the admiration for Darwin revealed in his review of MacDiarmid's poetry) provided a background which echoed and responded to this stress rather than passively absorbed it.

The same might be said of his response to Pound's *melopoeia*, "wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning." <sup>135</sup> Bunting's prior interests and experience in music reinforced his acceptance of Pound's view that "poetry withers and 'dries out' when it leaves music, or at least an imagined music, too far behind it." <sup>136</sup>

There are differences in their use of musical qualities in poetry, however. Charles Tomlinson, while finding Pound's presence overwhelming to the reader in the first eight lines of Ode 36, (C.P., p.121), notes

that in this pastiche "something different from Pound occurs with the gathering forces that lift through the concealed rhyme (seen/between) and in the rising tone and syntax of 'the frieze [striding] to the impending apse'." <sup>137</sup> This difference is often, as here, a lucid music reinforced by syntax, as in Tomlinson's further analysis of a line from 'The Orotavo Road',

Its ill-roped crates heavy with fruit sway

(C.P., p.115)

where the delay of the verb is felt "tugging down the final spondee with something of the weight of that ill-roped and precarious burden of crates." <sup>138</sup> (One is also reminded here of Bunting's admiration for Horace's skill with word order.)

Despite the lucidity of Bunting's music, however, there is in the musical element a "contrary current" which Pound contrasts with the utter precision of phanopoeia, "a force tending often to lull, or to distract the reader from the exact sense of the language. It is poetry on the borders of music and music is perhaps the bridge between consciousness and the unthinking sentient or even insentient universe." <sup>139</sup> Bunting recently praised Pound's poetry in terms which similarly distract the reader from the exact sense of the language: "If you will read his Cantos aloud and listen, without troubling your head about their meaning, you will find, especially in the later Cantos, a surge of music that is its own meaning." <sup>140</sup>

Although this surge of music may sometimes be felt to occur below the intricate surface texture of Bunting's poetry, I find the views of Pound on poetry, music and the unthinking universe interesting chiefly in relation to the sublime element in Bunting's verse to be discussed later. Here one would note that it was an element that was always latent, even in the satirical verse. In the markedly political 'They

Say Etna', omitted from Collected Poems, he gives in little an indication of the environments which he has made his own, precisely those in opposition to the marketplace:

Capital is everything except the desert,  
sea, untunnelled rock, upper air.

(Poems 1950, p.153)

These sublime images recur throughout his poems: the deserts of 'Villon' II and 'The Spoils' I and III; the sea throughout, but especially in 'Briggflatts'; the untunnelled rock in 'They Say Etna',

In a squat cavern a  
naked man on his  
knees with a  
pickaxe rips a nugget from the coalface.

And finally the stars,

Furthest, fairest things, stars, free of our humbug,  
each his own, the longer known the more alone,  
wrapt in emphatic fire roaring out to a black flue.

(C.P., p.70)

All these regions exhibit an independence from mankind ("free of our humbug") which attracts Bunting - all are landscapes which by their unknown and unknowable qualities are worthy of exploration.

He has explored them physically as well as poetically. It is more from Bunting's own travels than through the influence of Pound that society as a theme includes far-flung cultures. Bunting's voyages, moreover, have given him a strength which Pound for all his poetic mastery lacked. As Donald Davie points out in Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor (p.32), the usual way of explaining Pound's choice of the Odyssey rather than the Iliad as a standard of poetic reference is to insist on Odysseus as "the voyager", like Hanno the Carthaginian and other navigators who are to appear in the Cantos, as the man who knows his world experimentally in coastlines followed and landfalls aimed at, not as configurations on a map. But this, Davie says, is to make of

Pound's Odysseus the Odysseus of Tennyson, not of Homer - for Homer's Odysseus is voyaging home. There is no danger of such a mistake arising in Bunting's case, for he too is voyaging home, not only in his poems but in the factual sense that he sailed on his yacht from Rapallo to the Canary Islands, and thence back to England, working with the Devon fishermen before returning by a rather circuitous route to the "Cold northern clear sea-gardens" in service with the Arctic convoys. (Once he had arrived home, however, it could be said that the Tennysonian figure comes into play, the effect of the Coda on our understanding of the persona of 'Briggflatts' V being partly to suggest that here is a coda to 'Ulysses' as Tennyson's poem is itself a coda to the Odyssey.)

Since Bunting is a poet the facts get into the poetry and are made into poetry, so that the voyage becomes one of poetic search and exploration:

Neither (aequora pontis)  
 on the sea's bulge  
 would the 'proud, full sail'  
 avail  
 us, stubborn against the trades,  
 closehailed,  
 stiff, flat canvas;  
 our fingers bleed  
 under the nail  
 when we reef.

(C.P., p.32)

The "level ocean" of Lucretius (Bunting's translation, C.P., p.135) and the "proud, full sail" of an outmoded rhetoric (Shakespeare's tribute to the "great verse" of a rival poet in Sonnet 86) can achieve nothing for modernist poets intent on reefing their canvas, on compressing experience into durable verse: but the cost in personal hardship involved (in poverty, broken relationships and self-doubt) is attested by fingers bleeding under the nail. There is, then, rarely a split between image and experience in the poetry of Basil Bunting.

The same was only partly true in Pound's case, as he himself came

to feel: "I picked out this and that thing that interested me, and then jumbled them into a bag. But that's not the way to make ...a work of art." <sup>141</sup> While Pound is obviously a greater poet than Bunting, he is also a more imperfect one. There is a sense in which Bunting has repaid the debt of his apprenticeship to Pound by condensing and correcting in his turn a work left imperfect by a sick and aging master. His own epic structure of 'Briggflatts' takes up Pound's themes - "his search for prophetic truth and a right knowledge of the beautiful" and a related sexual symbolism whereby "Pound seeks to restore the sexual mysteries that are the wellsprings of religion and art and that have suffered centuries of neglect because of the rise of 'usury' and commercialism" <sup>142</sup> - and reworks them in a way which is more personal, more central to the traditions of English poetry, by replacing Pound's "total field" approach with the sounds of the single voice, the pattern of dialectic, the growth of a single poetic mind.

If - and here I touch very briefly for the moment on the influence of Louis Zukofsky - if poetry "approaches in varying degrees the wordless art of music as a kind of mathematical limit", and if it is "the completed action of writing words to be set to music...music being the one art that more than others aims in its reach to speak to all men," <sup>143</sup> then the quest for poetry, though a sublime one, must express itself in images which can speak to all men. Thus while the sea in Bunting's poetry is timeless and expresses the "indistinguishable, inexpressible mass or void," in Cox's words, it is also and always the sea which men have sailed where

Weary on the sea  
for sight of land  
gazing past the coming wave we  
see the same wave.

(C.P., p.87)

The sea is symbolic, timeless, in its context in this poem, but what

speaks to us is the eager watching followed by inevitable disappointment which the lucid cadence of the verse achieves in the last two lines.

Bunting's letters to Zukofsky (which still await detailed analysis in the Humanities Research Library of the University of Texas at Austin) give some evidence of the way in which the latter helped him focus words to achieve his characteristic lucidity. The influence of the Objectivist movement on Bunting's work will be discussed in Chapter V.

In 1932 Bunting wrote: "We are not concerned here with Eliot's opinions. They have had an illegitimate influence, that is to say, imitators have tried to make poetry out of Eliot's emotions instead of their own, have borrowed the content of his verse instead of studying its form and applying its devices, when applicable, to matter of their own." <sup>144</sup> The application of forms and devices of others to matter of his own is a feature of all Bunting's borrowings. His independence of mind shows through in the diversity of his masters: one gets the impression that he has sought them out rather than been passively moulded by them, and chosen them, moreover, by reason of some similarity of aim or temperament, so that the "influences" reinforce each other as well as some original tendency. We have, for instance, noted his preference for contrast and variety in sound, image and structure in his own poetry and in that of others. When he writes that in Villon and Corbière "sublimities and atrocities are made to rub shoulders in consecutive lines.... They do, deliberately, crack the surface, jar the reader. They have a quite personal poignancy, they make claims" <sup>145</sup> he is emphasising a feature of his own poetry too.

To summarise briefly the question of influence, then, one may suggest firstly that Bunting does not directly imitate the themes and images of poets whom he admires so much as study their forms and apply their devices to his own matter, as in his use of Spenserian pastoral,

for example, In the process he has followed Pound's advice that the poet should fill his mind with the finest cadences of different languages and has used these not only to create a subtle surface beauty but to emphasise or carry his meaning. Secondly, since Bunting seems most often influenced by poets in tune with his own attitudes or personality, it is difficult to say to what extent they have altered what he already was or would have become. Thirdly, when he does imitate particular lines or passages he often alters them to fit a new context of imagery, as with the passage from Dante in Section IV of 'The Well of Lycopolis'. Fourthly - a point of view to be developed towards the end of this study - from literature, and especially from Spenser, Dante and the Bible, Bunting has absorbed a total structure of imagery, myth and form which will be seen to give his work a coherence that has so far gone unrecognised.

NOTES TO CHAPTER III

1. Martin Dodsworth, The Listener 81, No.2087 (27 March 1969), p.433.
2. Hugh MacDiarmid, in a letter to the publishers, quoted on the covers of Collected Poems (1968).
3. R.S. Woof, 'Basil Bunting's Poetry', Stand 8, No.2 (1966), p.34.
4. Peter Porter, London Magazine 9, No.3 (New Series, June 1969), p.77.
5. Ibid.
6. T. Clark, Poetry 109, No. 2 (November 1966) p.111.
7. Peter Porter, op.cit.
8. Jonathan Williams to the author in a letter dated 21 November 1973.
9. Martin Dodsworth, op.cit.
10. Winifred Nowotny, The Language Poets Use (London 1962), p.18.
11. Kenneth Cox, 'A Commentary on Basil Bunting's "Villon",' Stony Brook 3-4 (Fall 1969), p.69
12. Anthony Suter, '"Chomei at Toyama": commentaire critique du poème de Basil Bunting', Annales de l'Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, tome vii, 1971, Caliban VIII, pp. 77-87.
13. K.L. Goodwin, The Influence of Ezra Pound (London, 1966), p.201.
14. See below, Chapter VI, for an examination (inter alia) of Section II of that poem as Summer and Purgatory, of Section III as an enactment of "fickle life", of Section V as the expiation of a drift of sins, and of Section I as broken commandment.
15. Kenneth Cox, 'The Aesthetic of Basil Bunting', op.cit., p.23.
16. Basil Bunting, 'A Statement', in J. Williams, op.cit.
17. Ibid.
18. Herbert Read, 'Basil Bunting: Music or Meaning?', Agenda 4, Nos. 5-6 Autumn 1966), p.5.
19. Ibid., p.9.
20. Andrew Wylie, Agenda 7, No. 2 (Spring 1969), p.47.
21. R.S. Woof, op.cit., p.34.
22. Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (hereinafter referred to as A.C.) p.96.



23. Anthony Suter, a review, op.cit., p.142.
24. Anthony Suter, 'Time and the Literary Past in the Poetry of Basil Bunting', op.cit., p.518.
25. Basil Bunting, 'Mr. T.S. Eliot', op.cit., p.500.
26. Ibid., p.499.
27. The relationship between the poetry of Eliot and Bunting will be examined further in Chapter V.
28. Learned in conversation, 1 July 1974.
29. Rather dubiously, I feel, from the correspondences he puts forward in '"Attis: Or, Something Missing", a reading of the poem by Basil Bunting', Durham University Journal, (March 1973) pp. 189-200. Quotation from p.193, note 12.
30. Psalm 109 in the Authorised Version. Villon says in Le Testament that if he has to pray for the bishop who imprisoned him, he will recite "Le verselet escrit septieme / Du psaume de Deus Laudem," thereby giving Bunting the idea of putting that part of the psalm directly into his poem.
31. Anthony Suter, 'Time and the Literary Past in the Poetry of Basil Bunting', op.cit., p.520.
32. In the original psalm, "and let another take his office."
33. Cf. F.W. Bateson's analysis of 'Ode on A Grecian Urn', English Poetry : A Critical Introduction (1966), p.153.
34. Northrop Frye, A.C., p.97.
35. Frank Kermode, Continuities (London, 1968), p.121.
36. Basil Bunting, 'A Statement', in J. Williams, op.cit.
37. Andrew Wylie, in op.cit., p.47.
38. Basil Bunting, 'Criticism and Music', The Outlook 61, No. 1578 (28 April 1928), pp. 526-527.
39. Ibid.
40. Basil Bunting, 'Open Letter to Louis Zukofsky', 7 September 1932. Quoted in Victoria Forde, op.cit., p.14.
41. Northrop Frye, A.C., p.97, a quotation from which is reprinted as epigraph to this chapter.
42. Anthea Hall, 'Basil Bunting Explains How a Poet Works', op.cit.
43. Letter dated 20 November 1933. Poetry Magazine Papers, University of Chicago Library. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., pp. 109-110.

44. Letter dated 6 August 1953. A reference to his father's readings from Wordsworth, referred to in Chapter II. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.39.
45. Letter to Zukofsky, dated 3 November 1948. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.40.
46. Joseph Skipsey. Selected Poems, ed. Basil Bunting, (Sunderland, 1976).
47. Reprinted in The Listener 84, No. 2176 (8 October 1970), p.484.
48. A local reference when the Tyne was still a salmon river: "by line 180 odd I have been angling a long time for a very big fish and only landed something for which the Board of Fisheries formula seems an exact and fitting description." Letter to Harriet Monroe (30 November 1930), Poetry Magazine Papers, University of Chicago Library.
49. Basil Bunting, introductory remarks to 'The Brothers', op.cit.
50. Basil Bunting, in J. Williams, op.cit.
51. 1 July 1974.
52. Basil Bunting, 'What about Herbert Read?', Agenda 7, No. 2 (Spring 1969), p.44.
53. John White, The Scottish Border and Northumberland, (London, 1973), p.21.
54. Basil Bunting, in Agenda 12, No.2 (Summer 1974), p.32.
55. Basil Bunting, in meantime, p.78.
56. 'The Prelude' XIV, l.397. The Poetical Works of Wordsworth, ed. De Selincourt, p.588.
57. Marshall McLuhan, The Mechanical Bride : Folklore of Industrial Man, (London, 1967), p.85.
58. Basil Bunting, 'Mr. T.S. Eliot', op.cit., p.499.
59. G. Wilson Knight, op.cit., p.9.
60. Ibid., p.12.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid., p.15. Reference to 'The Prelude' XII, ll.75-92.
63. Cf. in his article 'Philosophic Criticism', The Outlook 60, No. 1540 (6 August 1927), p.188, Bunting's scorn of a science that pretends that "its universe of exact measurement and strict logic 'exhausts' all the subjects of thought and knowledge" ignoring the realms of religion and art, "both wide regions in which the mind must wander without a chart, in which the dominant mode of thought is not logical but intuitive."

64. G. Wilson Knight, op.cit., p.15.
65. Letter dated 28 July 1949. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., pp. 46-47.
66. G. Wilson Knight, op.cit., p.16.
67. Ibid., p.91.
68. A letter to Zukofsky (7 February 1951) explains this as an allusion to Khayyam's early reform of the calendar (preceding the Gregorian reform by five centuries) or, and this is the sense I take, to the sceptical outlook of the poet. (Noted in Forde, op.cit., p.173).
69. G. Wilson Knight, op.cit., p.16.
70. Ibid., p.20.
71. Ibid., p.32.
72. Ibid., p.82.
73. Ibid., p.97.
74. Ibid., p.103 ff.
75. Ibid., p.113.
76. Ibid., pp. 140-141.
77. Basil Bunting, meantime, op.cit., p.69.
78. G. Singh, Critical Quarterly Vol. 17, No. 4 (Winter 1975) p.312.
79. Donald Hall, 'Ezra Pound: An Interview', Paris Review No. 28 (Summer/Fall 1962), p.49.
80. Noel Stock, Reading The Cantos: The Study of Meaning in Ezra Pound (1965). Quoted in J.P. Sullivan, Ezra Pound: A Critical Anthology (Harmondsworth, 1970), p.342.
81. Ezra Pound, Selected Prose, ed. W. Cookson (London, 1933), p.171. Quoted in G. Singh, op.cit., p.314.
82. Basil Bunting, Agenda 8, Nos. 3-4 (Autumn/Winter 1970), p.62.
83. Letter dated 3 November 1948. Quoted in Forde op.cit., p.71.
84. Basil Bunting, meantime, p.71.
85. Basil Bunting, 'Eheu Fugaces, Postume, Postume', Agenda 8, Nos. 3-4 (Autumn/Winter 1970), p.61.
86. Louis Zukofsky, Poetry 38 (April 1931), p.56. The poem had been published in Poetry 37 (February 1931) entitled 'The Word' with Ode 16 (C.P., p.102) as 'Appendix: Iron'.

87. Learned in conversation, 1 July 1974.
88. Basil Bunting, in a review of More Collected Poems and A Clyack-Sheaf by Hugh MacDiarmid, op.cit.
89. T.R. Barnes, English Verse: Voice and Movement from Wyatt to Yeats, (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 3-7.
90. Learned in conversation, 1 July 1974.
91. Letter to Zukofsky, dated "June the New Moonth, 1953." Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.47.
92. Basic points gathered from Encyclopaedia Britannica.
93. Renee Winegarten, French Lyric Poetry in the Age of Malherbe (Manchester, 1954). Quoted in V. Forde, op.cit., p.48.
94. Basil Bunting, meantime, pp. 79-80.
95. Quoted in Hallet Smith, Elizabethan Poetry (Ann Arbor, 1968), pp. 279-280.
96. Basil Bunting, meantime, p.74.
97. W.B. Yeats: Selected Prose, ed. A. Norman Jeffares (London, 1964), p.154. "Antille" refers to George Antheil (b. 1901), the American composer.
98. Basil Bunting to Ezra Pound, letter dated 26 February 1951. Carlton Lake Collection, Humanities Research Library, University of Texas at Austin. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.92.
99. Basil Bunting, 'Modern Translation', The Criterion 15, No. 41 (July 1936), p.715.
100. Letter dated 28 May 1949. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.85.
101. Letter dated 28 July 1949. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.85.
102. Ibid., pp. 85-86.
103. Basil Bunting, op.cit., above Chapter II, note 43.
104. Letter dated 6 August 1953. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.168.
105. Letter dated 6 August 1949. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.91.
106. Kenneth Cox, 'A Commentary on Basil Bunting's "Villon"', op.cit., p.60.
107. See V. Forde, op.cit., pp. 155-122; K. Cox, 'Commentary' passim; A. Suter, 'Time and the Literary Past in the Poetry of Basil Bunting', op.cit., pp. 512-515.
108. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.157.

109. In meantime, p.74.
110. Walt Whitman, notes for a lecture, in An American Primer. Quoted in F.O. Matthiessen, American Renaissance (New York, 1962), p.517.
111. F.O. Matthiessen, op.cit., p.518.
112. Ibid., p.535.
113. Forde, op.cit., p.179.
114. Quoted in Matthiessen, op.cit., p.580.
115. Ibid., p.525.
116. Ibid.
117. Walt Whitman, 'Had I The Choice', Leaves of Grass, ed. G.W. Allen (New York, 1958), p.389.
118. Walt Whitman, Specimen Days, quoted in Matthiessen, op.cit., p.565.
119. Ibid.
120. G.W. Allen, Introduction to op.cit., p.xvii.
121. See The Oxford English Dictionary, 'bent', entry 11.5.
122. Robert Creeley, 'Basil Bunting: An Appreciation', op.cit., p.12.
123. Argument of December Eclogue, 'The Shepheardes Calender', Spenser: Poetical Works, ed. Smith and De Selincourt (London, 1965), p.464.
124. Hallet Smith, op.cit., p.35.
125. Ibid., p.42.
126. Ibid., p.46.
127. Ibid., p.47.
128. Letter to Leippert, dated 30 October 1932. Robert Lane Latimer Papers, University of Chicago Library. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.3.
129. J.P. Sullivan, Ezra Pound: A Critical Anthology (London, 1970), p.26.
130. Basil Bunting, 'Prince of Poets', op.cit.
131. Ezra Pound, Collected Shorter Poems (London, 1973), p.228.
132. Michael Reck, 'A Conversation between Ezra Pound and Allen Ginsberg', Evergreen Review No. 57 (June 1968), pp. 28-29. In J.P. Sullivan, op.cit., p.353.

133. Ezra Pound, 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', Poetry 1 (1913). In J.P. Sullivan, op.cit., p.43.
134. Basil Bunting, letter to Zukofsky dated 2 October 1932. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.16.
135. Ezra Pound, 'How to Read, or Why', Literary Essays (1954). In J.P. Sullivan, op.cit., p.110.
136. Ezra Pound, 'Vers Libre and Arnold Dolmetsch', Literary Essays (1954), p.437. In J.P. Sullivan, op.cit., p.82.
137. Charles Tomlinson, 'Experience in Music', Agenda 4, No. 5-6 (Autumn 1966), p.12.
138. Ibid.
139. Ezra Pound, 'How to Read, or Why', op.cit., in J.P. Sullivan, op.cit., pp. 111-112.
140. Basil Bunting, 'Prince of Poets', op.cit.
141. Daniel Cory, 'Ezra Pound: A Memoir', Encounter 30, No. 5 (1968). Reprinted in J.P. Sullivan, op.cit., p.375.
142. M.L. Rosenthal, The Modern Poets, (New York, 1965), p.69.
143. Louis Zukofsky, Prepositions: The Collected Critical Essays of Louis Zukofsky, (New York, 1968), p.17.
144. Basil Bunting, 'Mr. T.S. Eliot', op.cit., p.499.
145. Ibid.

#### CHAPTER IV : APPROACH THROUGH MUSIC AND SYNTAX

Basil Bunting has made many comparisons between poetry and music. In the following example, "Poetry is akin to music... It is impossible to give an English prose account of either."<sup>1</sup> he characteristically compounds the difficulties the critic must deal with by linking the two subjects on which it is impossible to say the final word.

It is noteworthy that Bunting's use of the musical analogy for poetry is based, like the rest of his work, on experience: he has a wide professional knowledge of music derived from his period as music critic for the London Outlook in 1927 and 1928, as well as from his own interests and the early experiences mentioned in Chapter II.

Bunting was early interested in Eliot's use of the musical term 'Preludes' - "even though the resemblance to, say, Chopin's Preludes was slight and superficial", but he had thought all along that the sonata was the more likely form to be of use: "But I got off on the wrong foot trying to imitate Beethoven's sonatas, using extremely violent contrasts in tone and speed which don't actually carry well onto the page, and I had to puzzle about that for awhile before I discovered it was better to go back to a simpler way of dealing with the two themes, and to take the early or mid-eighteenth-century composers of sonatas - John Christian Bach and Scarlatti - as models to imitate".<sup>2</sup>

There is some difficulty of definition with regard to Scarlatti sonatas: freedom of form seems to be governing trait, although scholars agree that they are almost always one movement sonatas in binary form, that is, divided roughly in halves. Freedom is also evident in the works of John Christian Bach, who emphasized thematic contrasts and demonstrated the dramatic possibilities in the transition sections rather than allowing them to remain ornamental. As S.V.M. Forde points

out, these characteristics are recognisable in each of Bunting's Sonatas. The attraction of a form which allows the freedom to accommodate a variety of contrasts and associations is obvious from his remarks on Horace, Villon and Manucehri. And the freedom extends, of course, to the musical analogy itself which, though always in his mind, does not control it: "Music has suggested certain forms and certain details to me, but I have not tried to be consistent about it. Rather, I've felt the spirit of a form, or of a procedure, without trying to reproduce it in any way that could be demonstrated on a blackboard. (There's no one-one relationship between my movements and any of Scarlatti's)". <sup>3</sup>

Despite this warning Forde does try to demonstrate some more-or-less consistent link between 'Briggflatts' and the Scarlatti B minor sonata which was in Bunting's mind during the period of composition - although not, I think, very convincingly. My final suggestions in this study will be that the form of that poem, and its content, are completely literary and traditional rather than musical. She mentions the usefulness of musical terms in describing Bunting's work - e.g. incremental repetition of themes and recurrent motifs, contrasting rhythms, tempos and textures of sound and tone colour etc., but one is not convinced that these say more about the real nature of the poetry than other standard critical terms, or that the musical analogy might not be used with more daring on the critic's part. Similarly, much close work remains to be done to demonstrate the truth, if any, of Eliot's definition of a "musical poem" as one which "has a musical pattern of sound and a musical pattern of the secondary meanings of the words which compose it". <sup>4</sup>

A good start is made by G.S. Fraser in his review of Poems 1950. <sup>5</sup> He applies to Bunting's poetry with most encouraging results, Point 2



of Dallam Flynn's introductory manifesto to the poems:

"If the verse-makers of our time are to improve on their immediate precursors, we must be vitally aware of the duration of syllables, of melodic coherence, and of the tone-leading of vowels".

While noting that this kind of abstraction of sound from sense rightly arouses the suspicions of practitioners of the New Criticism, Fraser makes the point that the study of a poem in terms of the kind of prose statements it can be translated into is abstraction too.

As an example of what Flynn probably means by the "tone-leading of vowels", Fraser gives the following:

Must ye bide, my good stone house,  
to keep a townsman dry?  
To hear the flurry of the grouse  
but not the lowing of the kye?

(C.P., p.104).

The "igh" and "eye" diphthongs, he notes, with their higher pitch, alternate with the lower-pitched "ow" diphthongs and "contribute very much to the effect of strong restrained pathos in this stanza: the alternation also is probably a simple example of what Mr. Flynn means by 'melodic coherence'".

As for the "duration of syllables":

Oval face, thin eyebrows wide of the eyes,  
a premonition in the gait  
of this subaqueous persistence  
of a particular year....

(C.P., p.103).

This is not, Fraser remarks, an attempt at "scanning" either in terms of stress or quantity, but

"merely mark[s] out syllables on which, for semantic or rhetorical reasons, or form some vague sense of the general euphonic pattern of the line, the voice tends to dwell. In the first line they are all long syllables. In the second line the 'e' of 'pre' is given emphasis by the consonants before and after, like the vowels of 'aqu' (akw) and 'sist': the explosive 'c' explains the possible very strong emphasis in the short stressed vowel of 'tic'. Very roughly indeed, the effect of the long vowels in the first line is that of lingering elegiac sadness, of the short vowels strongly buttressed by consonants in the last three lines that of fastidious,

regretful precision. One has a feeling that the first line flows easily and strongly forward, the last three are checked back."

The music in Bunting's poetry is seen by another critic as a harmony made out of conflict: "He is not making beautiful sounds merely, but seeking with an obsessional intensity what harmonies he can discover in all the conflicting elements he is conscious of." <sup>6</sup> At the same time, music is "a catalyst for vision", and the same critic points to the exciting lift to the mood in 'Briggflatts' Section IV, where the stanza on Scarlatti demonstrates that in the context of music, reality can be seen for what it is, and that is a total harmony:

As the player's breath warms the fipple the tone clears.  
It is time to consider how Domenico Scarlatti  
condensed so much music into so few bars  
with never a crabbed turn or congested cadence,  
never a boast or a see-here; and stars and lakes  
echo him and the copse drums out his measure,  
snow peaks are lifted up in moonlight and twilight  
and the sun rises on an acknowledged land.

(C.P., p.66).

The same power of music is demonstrated in little in this passage from 'The Spoils'

Flute,  
shade dimples under chenars  
breath of Naystani chases and traces  
as a pair of gods might dodge and tag between stars.

(C.P., p.42).

One notes how the movement flows from music itself ("flute"), presented as pre-existing to the reality it will become an expression of, to the artist's skill in attempting to render that reality, to the final (sublime) simile which defines the universal quality of this aesthetic moment.

Bunting, however, never equates poetry and music, never denies the essential difference between them that has often been pointed out; that music is pure form inasmuch as it expresses no determinate idea. The real confusion with the musical analogy lies in the divergent views

of the critics. We have already considered some responses to the idea of music in Bunting's poetry - the sonata definition, the melopoeia of Pound, textural expressiveness, a harmony made of conflicting elements, and the visionary element in music. Other approaches have included Suter's idea that the images in 'Chomei' "Strike the reader's spirit like...the successive sounds of music"; <sup>7</sup> and Kenneth Cox's view of music in the poetry (recommended in conversation by Bunting) as the developing, regrouping, inverting, revaluing and resolving of themes: in 'Villon' the "two opening themes are structurally related: living speech as against dead literature, inward experience as against outward semblance, the immediate as against the remote, the bare as against the ornamental, listening as against looking". <sup>8</sup>

In simpler terms S.V.M. Forde states that "the dominant contrast or chief opposition is between art and life, imagination and reality," <sup>9</sup> and shows how this theme is explored, reversed and finally resolved in the course of the poem.

Part of the reason for the divergent views of critics here is that some attempt to deal with music as the structure, others with music as the texture of poetry. It is possible, however, to find a way of uniting both features in order more fully to understand the influence of music in Bunting's poetry, and one may achieve this by two methods.

The first is that suggested by Donald Davie in his Articulate Energy: An Enquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry. In Chapter II, "Syntax on Music: Susan<sup>ne</sup> Langer", he begins by noting "the paradox of musical effect, which is, on the one hand, oppressively emotional (blurted out, a cry, or a moan) and on the other as rigorously dry and abstract as Euclid." <sup>10</sup> This in itself seems to bear some analogy to the impression often made by Bunting's verse (the basic themes emotional and traditional, the verse cut back rigorously and held in check) and

the analogy gains a new dimension if we learn from Susan<sup>ne</sup> Langer's account of musical effect, that "what music can actually reflect is only the morphology of feeling." It is "in presenting how feelings are built up, how they branch and fork and coalesce - that we find the articulating back and forth that is music's life." <sup>11</sup> This is also the life of Bunting's poetry.

"Articulation is its life, but not assertion: expressiveness, not expression. The actual function of meaning, which calls for permanent contents, is not fulfilled; for the assignment of one rather than another possible meaning to each form is never explicitly made". Thus Mrs. Langer on music, <sup>12</sup> and though as a worker with words Bunting cannot deny meaning altogether, nor would wish to, nevertheless he makes no attempt to assign any one explicit meaning, and his chosen sonata form is the one which will least resemble permanent contents.

Davie develops the idea of articulation of feelings in Chapter VII, Section 5, "Syntax like Music": "we have to say that poetic syntax is like music when its function is to please us by the fidelity with which it follows 'a form of thought' through the poet's mind but without defining that thought," (p.86) and he refers to his earlier definition that "the thought" in poetry is "the experience": "Hence it includes, if indeed it is not the same as, Mrs. Langer's 'feeling'."

The difficulty of articulating without asserting, he notes (p.86), was "circumvented by the use of the objective correlative, the invention of a fable or an 'unreal' landscape, or the arrangement of images, not for their own sakes, but to stand as a correlative for the experience that is the true subject of a poem in which it is not named." Poems written in this mode "employ a syntax that seems to be subjective and objective at once".

Bunting's stress on experience, the admitted influence of the early

Eliot (his structures, not his emotions), the avoidance of assertion and definition of thought ("never a boast or a see-here"), the interest in music, would all suggest that his poetry answers to this subjective/objective syntax, even if we had not already cited several examples from his work which please us by the fidelity with which they follow "a form of thought", feeling or experience through the poet's mind. Each reader will have his favourite instance - we have seen G.S. Fraser's, Charles Tomlinson's and others' analyses of different passages: one of my particular favourites is the whole of the first passage spoken by Lud in 'The Spoils' Section 1, (C.P., p.38) of which these lines are an example:

Silence under the high sun. When the ewes go out  
along the towpath striped with palm-trunk shadows  
a herdsman pipes, a girl shrills  
under her load of greens..

Here the unusual smoothness of the iambs in line 2 (unusual for Bunting, that is) is entirely functional in building up the peacefulness of the scene, which is broken by the reiterated stress of "girl shrills", as well as by its sound.

Davie's instances of syntax like music are interesting with regard to the question of the influences on Bunting's poetry: Eliot, Hopkins and "the figure of grammar" which he found pre-eminently in Hebrew poetry, and which Herbert Read has applied to the verse of Whitman. All these we have already cited as influential directly or indirectly on the form of Bunting's poetry. It would seem that a discernible unity is achieved in his poetry between his experience, his interests and influences, and his place in literary tradition on the one hand, and the musical forms and syntax in which these are expressed, on the other.

A second approach to the rival claims of music as texture or structure also reveals a total unity in Bunting's poetic universe and

forms. Here, as usual, Northrop Frye has the last word.

In the Anatomy of Criticism he distinguishes between the technical use of the word musical as applied to poetry, and the sentimental use of "calling any poetry musical if it sounds nice" (A.C., p.255). This latter use gives rise to such phrases as "smooth musical flow" or "harsh unmusical diction". Frye concludes that it is "more likely to be the harsh, rugged, dissonant poem (assuming of course some technical competence in the poet) that will show in poetry the tension and the driving accented impetus of music" (A.C., p.256). In this sense, careful balancing of vowels and consonants and a dreamy sensuous flow of sound belong most often to the unmusical poet (Pope or Keats or Tennyson) - though this is not a pejorative term. "When we find sharp barking accents, crabbed and obscure language, mouthfuls of consonants, and long lumbering polysyllables, we are probably dealing with melos, or poetry which shows an analogy to music, if not an actual influence from it" (A.C., p.256). These, except for the last item on the list, are precisely the charges which have been levelled against Bunting's poetry by some of his critics mentioned at the start of Chapter III. <sup>13</sup>

Bunting can sometimes be unmusical in Frye's sense (we have observed some of his careful balancing of vowels and consonants, though always to some purpose, never to achieve a "dreamy sensuous flow") but musical diction defines his poetry: "It is irregular in metre (because of the syncopation against stress), leans heavily on enjambement, and employs a long cumulative rhythm sweeping the lines up into larger rhythmical units such as the paragraph" (A.C., p.257). This view even accounts for the satirical tone which is as much part of Bunting's poetic attack as the sublime image. The opening paragraphs of 'Briggflatts' Sections II and III, for instance, are seen to form an integral part of this musical poet's "autobiography" (rather than to stand apart from the "celebration

of remote blood and ancestry" in other passages) since, in Frye's terms, "musical diction is better fitted for the grotesque and horrible, or for invective and abuse" (A.C., pp. 256-257).

There remain to be accounted for in Bunting's poetry the slower, more resonant rhythms and the visual or imagistic emphasis. The former are often the property, in Frye's terms, of the unmusical poets; and this group have another quality relevant to Bunting's art: they are "often 'pictorial' in a general sense: they frequently use their more meditative rhythms to build up, detail by detail, a static picture, as... in the elaborate tapestry-like pageants in The Faerie Queene" (A.C., p.258). Even more interestingly characteristic of Bunting's verse is their use of the rhetorical device known as imitative harmony or onomatopoeia, in which "The sound must seem an echo to the sense", in Pope's words. Frye suggests that the "most remarkably sustained mastery of verbal opsis in English, perhaps, is exhibited in The Faerie Queene...an ability to catch visualisation through sound. Thus in

The Hugh obedient to the bender's will  
the line has a number of weak syllables in the middle that makes it sag out in a bow shape" (A.C., p.259).

Visualisation through sound in Spenser, syntax as music in Davie's sense, "thinking with the things as they exist" in Louis Zukofsky's Objectivist terms - we have observed this feature of Bunting's art several times in the course of this study.

The conclusion seems inevitable that Bunting, by a lucky coincidence of birth, upbringing, wide experience of life and literature, love of music and poetic skill, has been able to draw into a unity subjective and objective elements, past and present influence, musical and unmusical poetry, diverse imagery, ironic realism and the sublime. In this poet's at first sight seemingly diverse universe a final unity and harmony may

be discerned - a unity which will emerge all the more clearly from further study of Bunting's poetic form.

Harmony, to quote another symboliste artist, is one of the three things needed for beauty (along with wholeness and radiance). The aesthetic image is apprehended "as complex, multiple, divisible, separable, made up of its parts, the result of its parts and their sum, harmonious. That is consonantia".<sup>14</sup> The discovery of harmony chosen or made out of the diverse world of experience is a valuable auspice of the harmony and beauty of particular poems. To return to the ancient Chinese metaphor: if the poet is one who "traps Heaven and Earth in the cage of form", then this study does not yet constitute a judgement on the strength of Bunting's cage of form. But the lie of the land where he sets his traps is also an indication of the trapper's skill - and of the likely size of his catch. In his long and careful study of literature and life Bunting has prepared himself to match himself against that most elusive of quarries, poetic beauty.



NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

1. Basil Bunting, quoted in A. Suter, 'Un "Raleigh" Moderne', op.cit., p.124.
2. Jonathan Williams, op.cit.
3. Basil Bunting to S.V.M. Forde, letter dated 23 May 1972. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.114. Further analysis of Bunting's sonata structures appears in Chapter V.
4. T.S. Eliot, 'The Music of Poetry', On Poetry and Poets (London, 1957), p.26.
5. G.S. Fraser, 'A Craftsman', op.cit., pp. 274-275.
6. R.S. Woof, 'Basil Bunting's Poetry', op.cit., p.28.
7. A. Suter, '"Chomei at Toyama". Commentaire critique du poème de Basil Bunting', op.cit., p.83.
8. Kenneth Cox, 'A Commentary on Basil Bunting's "Villon"', op.cit., p.61.
9. S.V.M. Forde, op.cit., p.117.
10. Donald Davie, Articulate Energy: An Enquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry (London, 1955), p.16.
11. Ibid., p.17.
12. In Philosophy in a New Key, (Harvard, 1942).
13. See, for example, the quotation from Peter Porter cited there.
14. Stephen Daedalus in James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (Harmondsworth, 1965), p.212.

CHAPTER V : IN AND OUT THE VORTEX -  
THE STRUGGLE OF THE MODERN.

Moving from the area of formative influences on Bunting's poetry to that of the form itself, one encounters midway the Objectivist poets. The group is generally held to comprise Louis Zukofsky and those poets whose work he chose to publish in the "Objectivists" issue of Poetry which he edited in February 1931, in An "Objectivists" Anthology (1932) and through To Publishers, later The Objectivist Press; George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff, Basil Bunting and William Carlos Williams. This movement (scarcely even a movement since, in Zukofsky's terms, "The objectivist ... is one person, not a group") provided a congenial environment for Bunting when in New York from June 1930 until January 1931, and may have reinforced his idea of what poetry was: certainly there are correspondences and coincidences of emphasis and method between these poets and himself.

With the exception of Williams, all were modernists of the second generation, and their obvious antecedents in Imagism and Vorticism invite further comparison and contrast with the older masters of the modern idiom; thus Pound, William Carlos Williams and T.S. Eliot may be seen to present three bearings which help plot Bunting's individual position in modern poetry.

What principles lay behind the movement were enunciated in characteristically elliptical fashion by Zukofsky in his introductory essay "Program: 'Objectivists' 1931" in Poetry, in which he formulated a poetics of "sincerity and objectification." Since, however, even Charles Reznikoff, an intelligent lawyer and in close contact with him at that time, admits to not being able to follow Zukofsky's formulation, one may be justified in ignoring the theory and concentrating on the

practice and on the general areas of agreement among the Objectivists. This is, I believe, close to the spirit of the movement, certainly as recalled by George Oppen: "all of us had considerable area of agreement, very considerable, but nobody signed a manifesto, and ... certainly not everybody was of the same opinion. But there is no question that there was a relationship among these poets. The poets Louis liked all held a certain attitude towards poetry." <sup>1</sup>

One minor, though interesting, coincidence of attitude towards poetry meant that, like Bunting, both Oppen and Rakosi felt compelled to give up writing poetry under the pressure of social and political forces during the thirties, and did not resume until the fifties. Their Communism was concerned with national issues of the American depression, but perhaps bears some relation to Bunting's eagerness, noted in W.C. Williams's autobiography, to fight Fascism in the international conflict; it is almost as if a heightened sense of objective, external reality, so useful for their poetry, also dictated the abandonment of merely subjective or personal considerations in a larger cause.

The most obvious similarity in the poetry, however, was their desire to write from an empirical standpoint in experience: Oppen, for example, entitled one collection Discrete Series, a mathematical phrase for "a series of terms each of which is empirically derived, each of which is empirically true. And this is the reason for the fragmentary character of those poems. I was attempting to construct a meaning by empirical statements, by imagist statements." <sup>2</sup> Again, Reznikoff defines an objectivist as a writer "who does not write directly about his feelings but about what he sees and hears; who is restricted almost to the testimony of a witness in a court of law; and who expresses his feelings indirectly by the selection of his subject-

matter and, if he writes in verse, by its music." <sup>3</sup> The links with Bunting's stress on writing from experience, with his use of subtle musical effects, and with the sonata form in which meaning is derived from a series of discrete statements, albeit linked thematically, are clear enough.

Care for economy and revision also linked these poets. Rakosi talks of constantly rewriting his poems, and Reznikoff, speaking of his plays in which the scenes are presented "imagistically", and without transitional dialogue, comments that there, as in his verse, he tried to "cut out everything that wasn't interesting in the hope that what was left would be," <sup>4</sup> - a phrasing that is reminiscent of Bunting's remarks on the present form of 'Briggflatts'.

The central area of relationship, however, was the shared friendship or interest or helpful criticism of Louis Zukofsky: this brings our attention, as it brought theirs, to the question of form. Oppen notes that he "learned from Louis, as against the romanticism, or even the quaintness of the imagist position, the necessity for forming a poem properly, for achieving form. That's what 'objectivist' really means.... People assume it means the psychologically objective in attitude. It actually means the objectification of the poem, the making an object of the poem." <sup>5</sup> It may be more than a coincidence that it was only in 1931, after returning to Rapallo from New York, that Bunting was able to capitalise on the sonata form which he had developed for 'Villon' some six years previously, by writing 'Attis' and 'Aus dem Zweiten Reich'.

Although the sense of form is somewhat vaguely defined by other Objectivist poets (Oppen speaks of "the sense of the relation between lines, the relation in their length... a sense of the relation of speed, of the alterations and momentum of the poem..." <sup>6</sup> and Zukofsky

of the "curve" of his long poem A), Rakosi's comment on Zukofsky's strong sense of form, "the inter-stitching, you might say, is extremely fine and stands up remarkably well," <sup>7</sup> seems relevant to the style of the shorter poems written when Bunting was in closest contact with Zukofsky:

Nothing  
 substance utters or time  
 stills and restrains  
 joins design and  
  
 supple measure deftly  
 as thought's intricate polyphonic  
 score dovetails with the tread  
 sensuous things  
 keep in our consciousness.

(C.P., p.101)

Prior to 1930 the lines of the Odes are in general longer, more dense; thereafter more open to Reznikoff's comparison of the pause at the end of each line to "a rest in music or a turn in a dance." <sup>8</sup> The smaller compass of the ode enabled Bunting to achieve this formal perfecting of speech and ideas, of movement and stillness, earlier than in the Sonatas.

Behind Objectivism echoed the spirit of Ezra Pound ("I think we all agreed that the term 'objectivism', as we understood Pound's use of it, corresponded to the way we felt poetry should be written... We were anti-Tennysonian." <sup>9</sup>) and the movement may be seen as a working out of principles outlined in his essay 'Vorticism' (1914). <sup>10</sup> There he speaks of the "objective reality" of his poem 'The Return'; quotes approvingly the Russian correspondent who realised that Pound sought thereby "to give people new eyes"; outlines vorticism as "art before it has spread itself into flaccidity, into elaboration and secondary applications," as against rhetoric and symbolism; he sees vorticism as a development of an Imagism which refused to use images as

ornaments ("The Image is itself the speech") and puts the case for the Japanese "one-image poem" or haiku, "a form of super position, that is to say it is one idea set on top of another" <sup>11</sup> - as in his own 'In a Station of the Metro'.

By the time the Objectivists came together, the vortex had in turn developed into the ideogram, a fusion rather than super-position of image and meaning, but much of their work can be seen as a calmer exploration and solidification of the ideas - of objective form, clarity of vision, economy, and direct use of striking and self-sufficient images - here so frenetically sketched out by Pound.

Discussing Pound in The Japanese Tradition in American Literature (1958), Earl Miner notes how he developed the super-pository method as a basic structure in many poems, including the Cantos: "Generally speaking, he uses the technique in the Cantos in two ways, either as a striking ending for a canto or, more frequently, within a canto to express intensely in an image what has gone before or what directly follows." <sup>12</sup>

In his stress on vorticism as an intensive art, in his effort to convey that "An image, in our sense, is real because we know it directly." <sup>13</sup> Pound is rather dismissive of the archetypal significance of some of his images as examined by "the professional student of symbology," <sup>14</sup> but, as Earl Miner has suggested, this "method of unifying diverse material through meaningful archetypes," <sup>15</sup> the unity of the image which, as his long note to 'Vorticism' makes clear, Pound perceived early in the Noh plays, is used to a considerable extent in the Cantos: light, the literary journey, merchandizing, - even the ideogram made into a symbol of value and functioning as an image. Bunting also employs archetypes for the same purpose, but, as I will suggest, the greatest source of unity and power is the form itself.

If for Pound "Dante's Paradiso is the most wonderful image," then it could be said that Bunting's sonata form is itself a vortex, though an objective one. While still "a radiant node or cluster...from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing," the action has been slowed to an English pace, suspended and rounded to a satisfactory, if temporary, conclusion.

The whole doctrine of the image and its attendant movements has been authoritatively put in its place by Frank Kermode:

Ultimately this image is the product of over a century of continuous anti-positivist poetic speculation, defining and defending the poet's distinct and special way of knowing truth. It involves a theory of form which excludes or strictly subordinates all intellectual speculation, and which finds in music, and better still in the dance, an idea of what art should be: entirely free of discursive content, thinking in quite a different way from the scientists....Form and meaning are co-essential, and the image belongs not to the mechanical world of intellect, but to the vital world of intuition... 16

Bunting may be further placed in relation to the three most influential figures of the modern movement: Pound, Williams, and Eliot. Moving freely between Europe and America in the thirties, Bunting had a foot in both camps, as it were. If one takes as a paradigm of the differing ideals of the two this dialogue between Pound and Williams from Paterson (I, iii),

- P. Your interest is in the bloody loam but what I'm after is the finished product.
- I. Leadership passes into empire; empire begets insolence; insolence brings ruin...

one might see Bunting's poetry as existing between Pound's "finished product" and William<sup>S</sup>'s "bloody loam"; for while he lacks most of Pound's insolence he also avoids the prolificacy become prolixity of Williams's long poem, the disunity or cultivated carelessness of Paterson Book Three, for example:

Only one answer: write carelessly so that nothing that is not green will survive.

Neither is there in Bunting, at least in the post-war period, the split between the "literary" as opposed to the "human" situation which so upsets Williams's poetess-correspondent. When he writes "Then is Now" in the final section of 'Briggflatts', the human reference to Bunting's memories of early experiences includes without difficulty the literary reference to Hardy's 'In The Small Hours' from Late Lyrics and Earlier:

It seemed a thing for weeping  
To find, at slumber's wane  
And morning's sly increeping,  
That Now, not Then, held reign.

Besides its relevance to the love relationship of the poem, the line also recalls Bunting's early enthusiasm for Hardy's poetry: as a young man he had been too timid to enter the house of the old poet whom he had travelled to visit.<sup>18</sup> An old poet himself now, he completes a work which celebrates and balances youth and age, the human and the literary.

Like Williams, Bunting turned against the poetry of T.S. Eliot, but for different reasons. Williams rejected 'The Waste Land' which, he complained in his Autobiography, "returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself - rooted in the locality which should give it fruit."<sup>19</sup> Bunting was content enough with the method of 'The Waste Land' but reacted strongly against the "English" Eliot of the later religious poetry in his introduction to the English issue of Poetry (February, 1932) which he co-edited with Michael Roberts, and <sup>in</sup> the mockery of the castrated poet in 'Attis'. Even in that poem, however, one detects a strange sense of identity with Eliot. Although the dialect poems of 1930 would seem to reveal a desire for a poetry "rooted in the locality" of Northumberland, the



mockery of Eliot is also set in Bunting country near the Cheviots and on the banks of the Tyne; <sup>20</sup> and this becomes outright self-mockery in 'The Well of Lycopolis', in which Bunting sees himself as sterile, trapped in a reference-ridden academic world, so far as the long poem is concerned, to which not even the drunken singing of sea shanties at the end of Section III of the poem can bring a breath of spontaneity: this may be the intention, but it is undercut by the literary reference to "Gadarine swihine."

Writing in 1950, Williams saw poetry as an "assertion with broken means but an assertion, always, of a new and total culture, the lifting of an environment to expression." <sup>21</sup> This he sets up, R.H. Pearce has suggested, "against Eliot's claims for the power of myth and religion and Pound's for the power of 'Kulchur'." <sup>22</sup> I would see Bunting as uniting, in 'Briggflatts' at least, these contrary claims, for there an environment is lifted into expression, but this is achieved in part through myth (see below, Chapter VII) and also with a full knowledge and acceptance of the area's cultural heritage, pagan and Christian, as well as of its harsh landscape.

This is achieved, moreover, without the dangers inherent in Williams's attempt, under the challenge of Eliot's poetic, to reconstitute a Whitmanian mode in which everything must be present, to the extent, Pearce considers, that "the line of the later poems works primarily as a means of imitating the rhythms of perception and cognition, not of discriminating among and organizing what is perceived and cognized." <sup>23</sup> While perception is a main interest of the Objectivist approach, and while some of Bunting's fine attempts at rendering reality in poetic terms of sound and rhythm have already been noted, in his case the individual perceptions are always subordinated to the overall government of the sonata form.

The Sonatas are themselves subordinated to a larger pattern, not merely to the form of a spiritual biography but within that scope, following Eliot perhaps, there is a sense of the subordination of the persona first to history, and then to myth. 'The Well of Lycopolis' showed the ego as exhausted, lacking personal creativity (though able to perceive it in the inspiration of the poem's final line). After Bunting's submission to the forces of history and chance in the Second World War, the persona is able to make proper use of the framework of mythology which had always been available to him in the literature he had earlier absorbed. Literature has this larger spiritual value for Bunting: the shifting personae of the early poems are let slip and he gradually assumes the discipline of his own voice.

The thirties loss of continuity, felt in terms of loss of narrative, was countered by extreme measures: engagement with Firdosi's epic structure to the exclusion of any long work of his own; and the sinking of his own identity in Persia in order that he might recover in 'The Spoils' a sense of culture and of the past. His own history is also involved. The movement of the poem from Biblical through Persian to Northern voices is the history of his own literary training, and despite the influence of Zukofsky in reshaping the poem and an occasional Poundian echo, the style is strongly individual, the role of the persona to encompass history rather than be fragmented by it. This sense of the recovery of his own past perhaps explains his renewed enthusiasm for Eliot's work: writing to Zukofsky from Teheran in 1947 he asked, "Have you read Eliot's 'Four Quartets'? I did in Cairo on my way here....The verse is exceedingly skillful - few Eliotisms. I was impressed, am hard to impress nowadays." 24

Although both Bunting and Eliot find that finally the sense of individual integrity is rooted in the past, in particular places, and

in a generalised sense of loss for what might have been, Bunting does not go beyond myth to the Truth which, for Eliot, lies behind it: the literary structure of myth is sufficient eternal verity for him, although it did take him a lifetime to surrender himself so that "Then is diffused in Now."

Bunting and Eliot both use musical forms to express their visions, but Bunting has been jealous of his original choice of the sonata: to Zukofsky he wrote in 1951, "But I do claim copyright, and bugger TSE. He was before me with Preludes, but I'd a bunch of Sonatas before he thought up his Quartets." <sup>25</sup> It was indeed an inspired choice, for after unsuccessful experimentation based on Beethoven's sonatas he discovered in the early and mid-eighteenth century sonatas of John Christian Bach and Scarlatti models which enabled him to deal with the complex expression of two themes in a strong and simple form.

Most of Scarlatti's sonatas are one-movement sonatas in binary form, and this is the structure of each Section of Bunting's Sonatas, in which a similar rough division into halves can be discerned. They are thus to be distinguished from the "normal" sonata form (the term is often used loosely in musical discussion), viz. a composition in which three or four movements in differing keys, rhythms and speeds are contrasted, with a return to the initial key in the final movement. Early eighteenth century one-movement sonatas often fall into a number of short sections in contrasting styles, a feature which is again discernible in Bunting's verse paragraphs within individual sections. In the linking of his one movement "sonata" sections into a larger structure, Bunting again follows musical example: "it was an obvious development to link two or three or four of them together in an age that was making so much of the dance suite. Something very like that

had already happened in J.C. Bach and others. The dance suite origin is made plain by the final movements, mostly minuets, rondos, etc." <sup>26</sup> Thus Bunting's poetry, without overt statement, approximates to the symbol of the dancer and the dance so central to post-Romantic poetry, as Kermode has shown: there is no gap between matter and form.

Bunting is himself very conscious of this:

Eliot - and Kipling - show prodigious skill in fitting words to a prearranged pattern, very admirable: yet they don't do it without losing some suppleness.... Critical notions are in control from the outside so that the poem is constrained to fit them, as though it had never been conceived in the form it wears.... My matter is born of the form - or the form of the matter, if you care to think that I just conceive things musically. There's no fitting, at least consciously." <sup>27</sup>

It is the form below the surface intricacy which gives Bunting's poetry its strength; it is the surface variations within the overall pattern of the dance which occasion the joy or admiration of those marking the performance. The quest for form comes first. Bunting has stated that his first step in writing 'Briggflatts' was to draw a symmetrical diagram of the movements of the poem (it also shows the binary form of the sonata within each section) which he then found matter to fit; <sup>28</sup>



It is possible to outline the other Sonatas in diagrammatic form, although I should like to include in the diagram the interplay of the themes with which they deal. A brief discussion will precede each diagram. The themes are the central lyric themes of Love and Death, and of Art itself as subsuming or reconciling both.

#### 'Villon'

In his first Sonata, Art and Death are the great contraries with which Bunting deals. Section I of the poem opens with Art as an

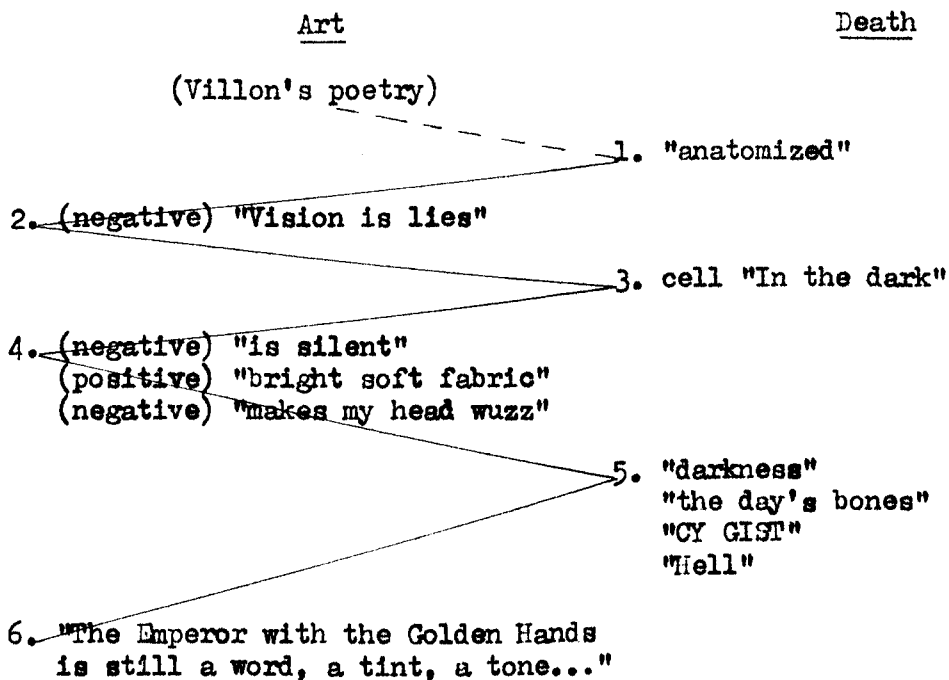
assumed perfection, understood, though not here directly present, in Villon's poetry. In this section Death in a variety of guises (criticism as anatomy practised on a poet's corpse, prison cell as grave, darkness, ghosts, doom) challenges an Art which may be a delusion merely, the product of a mind weakened by hunger and deprivation, but which in its beauty and presence is finally balanced ("insubstantial-glorious") against the fact of Death.

Section II opens with Death in control. This is challenged by Art in the forms of Bible, ballad and Archipiada ("for me she is any product of the imagination"). The negative aspect of Art, the overly formalised poetry of Ronsard, shades into the analytical, anatomical aspect of Death established at the start of the poem, in "anthropometrics" and the overconfident scientific measurement of particulars ("melted the snows from Erebus, weighed the clouds"). An apotheosis of the persona in the pantheon of great poets is countered by the thought of his own corpse "blackened by the sun, washed by the rain" (although hanging between earth and heaven it perhaps balances Death and Art: the line is, after all, a translation of a poem Villon made).

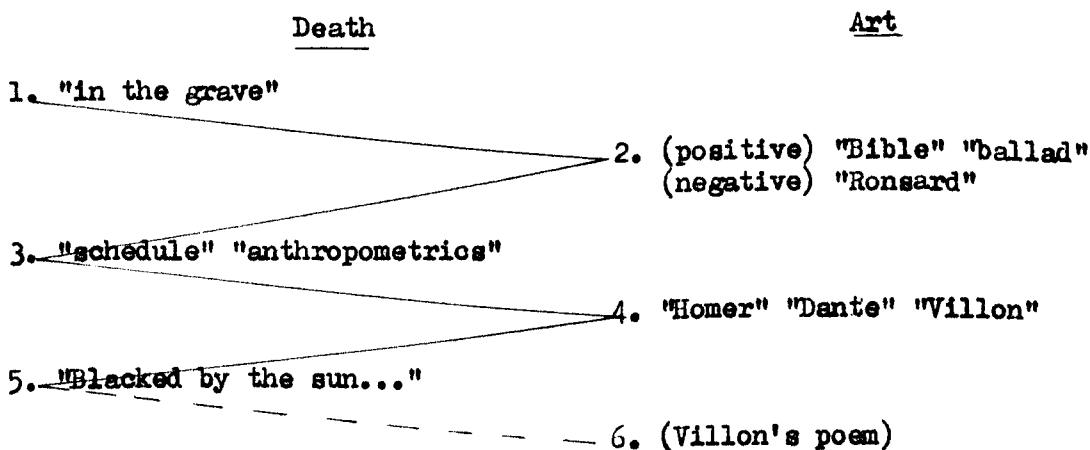
Section III starts from this tentative balance: the imagistic sequence may, as Kenneth Cox suggests, reflect a painting actually seen by Bunting, but the Art of the sea's "blue tapestries" merges into the "gravecloths of men" in the following line and the description of ports as "spoiled sacked." Art dominates in the description of the poet-craftsman's "precision clarifying vagueness," but the mood swings back to the sea's lack of renewal and its silence: this shadows the final lines on Bunting's own imperfection, but the fact that the Sonata has at least been completed, and that the sea does possess at least "a single note," brings the poem to the point where contraries

are reconciled and balanced.

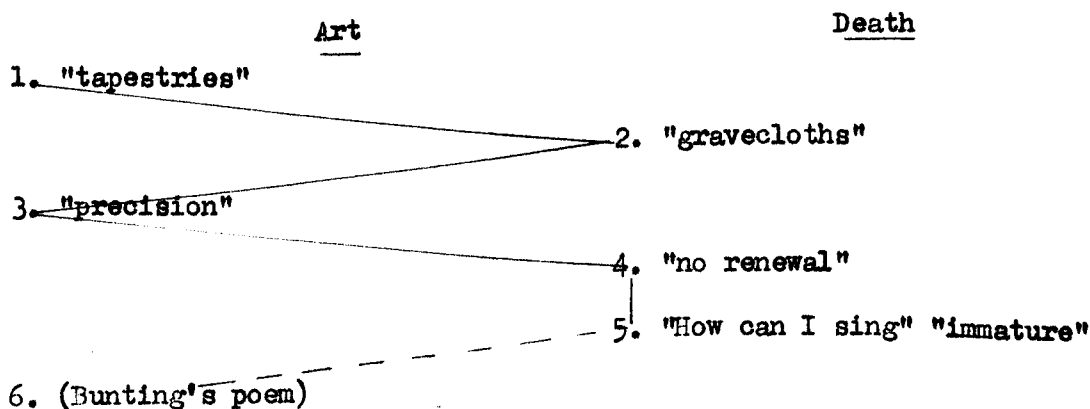
## Section I



## Section II



## Section III



Such a diagram gives a sense of the to and fro of the dance of the intellect among words. Simplifying it somewhat, and turning it on edge, one arrives at a clearer view of the binary form of each movement of the suite, with the line or phrase that marks the turning point.

### Section I

"Then he saw his ghosts glitter with golden hands"

negative vision

(Art)  (Death)

### Section II

"Till Ronsard put a thimble on her tongue"

positive Art

Death  Death (Art?)

### Section III

"shipless spoiled sacked / because of the beauty of Helen"

positive Art?

(Art)  Art

positive Art

'Attis: Or Something Missing'

The themes of this poem are Death and Love, although Death here includes artistic sterility, and Love the whole creative impulse both in nature and art. These are brought together in the figure of the eunuch who is also a failed poet. Ostensibly T.S. Eliot, the figure is in some ways a projection of Bunting's own position. Cybele, the Mother of Gods and Eunuchs, on whose altar the poet sacrifices his masculinity, bears some resemblance to Keats' figure of Lamia and other Romantic symbols of the fatal attractions of the world of the imagination.

This Sonata proceeds by means of violent contrasts of tone, rhythm and imagery, in keeping, presumably, with the "madness before the

frenzy" of the religious rites to which it makes reference through the epigraph from Carmen LXIII of Catullus, and within the text. It opens with the living death of the castrato "limp with satiety" and in pain (his fastidious rearrangement of which perhaps recalls the anatomical mentality of 'Villon'). This is contrasted with the creative power of music and the dance ("flutes and oboes" "dancers") which is itself immediately countered by the destructive wash of the sea ("wreckage that drifted / in drifts out"). A loamy northern landscape creates an impression of fruitful nature, but this is only a memory: the soil is now parsimonious, and the earth goddess of "corn and fruit" is also, with her lousy skin, "Mother of Eunuchs." The balance poises, then tips towards Death in the "Earthquakes," "Ravenous animals" and "Eunuchs" of the final lines.

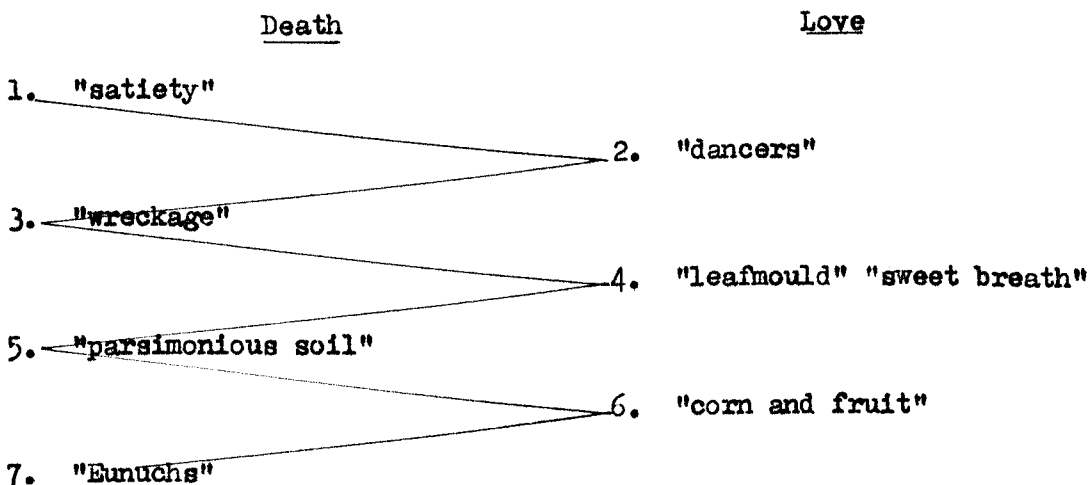
Section II begins in Death, the dead wife being an Eliotic motif. There is a momentary suggestion of saving grace in the "stately music" of the fertility festival, but this soon descends into the world of the Furies: last light, revenge, "decay of ardour," the city world, night and infidelity. Death takes all.

Section III opens with Love in the "mournful stave" of the Pastorale, but ironically: it is only "Attis grieving for his testicles," a state of sterility further evoked by the "geldings" and the "cruel ghost of my manhood/limp in hell," intermittently countered by the "procreative energy" and "heave of spring." Roses and myrtles, according to the oracle, do not constitute sufficient creative basis for life or art: the "lavish roses" perhaps mock the mystic rose of religious poetry, the "naively/portentous myrtles" Eliot's latest claims to poetic honour, and the pathetic question "Shall we be whole in Elysium?" is one no poet, no Objectivist poet, should properly ask. The "muse" of true poetry, however, "defrauds" the Mother of the Gods

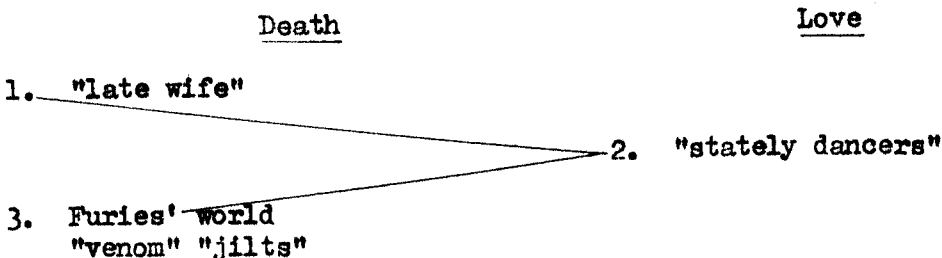


by recreating the actual through words and music. This brings the poem to a point of balance between Love and Death. One is reminded of Reznikoff's praise of Stanislavski's statement that "art is love with technique." 29

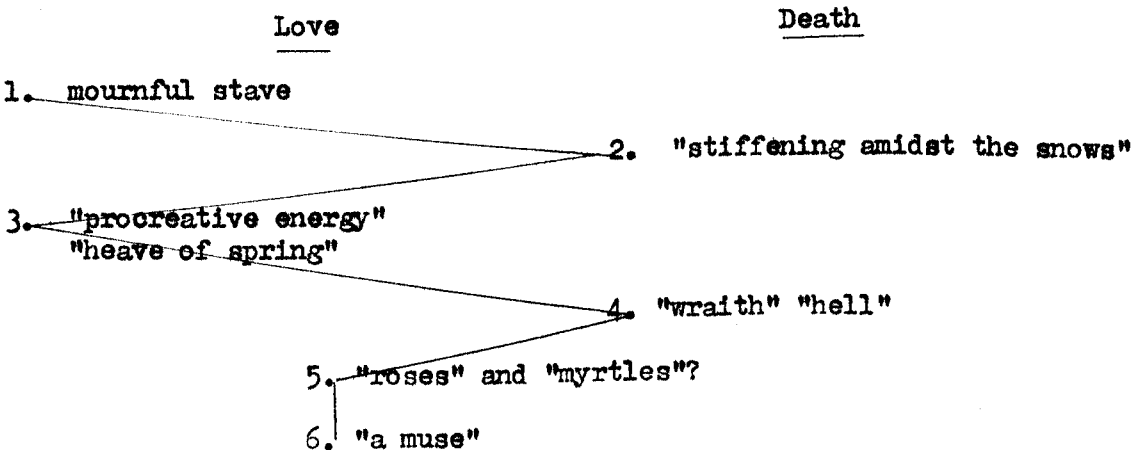
### Section I



### Section II

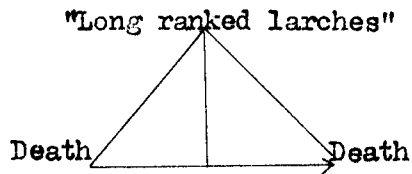


### Section III

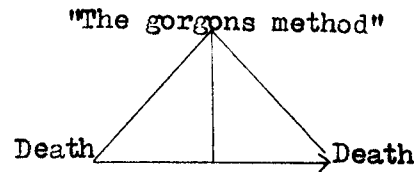


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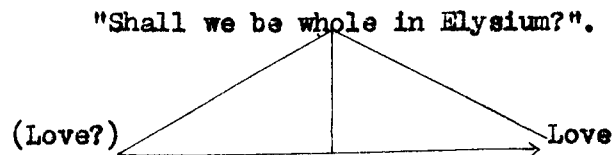
Section I



Section II



Section III



'Aus dem Zweiten Reich'

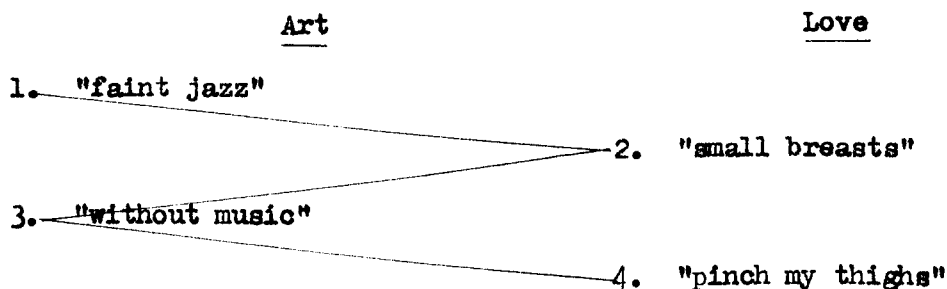
Negation becomes even more predominant in this Sonata: the themes of Love and Art are explored solely in their negative aspects, an attitude arising from Bunting's experience of Germany on his visit of 1929. His opinion was not altered by arrival of the "renowned" German dramatist Gerhart Hauptmann (Nobel prize winner, and at the time regarded as the patriarch of modern German literature) in Rapallo in the same year, where he met Pound, Bunting and Yeats, who found him "fine to look at - after the fashion of William Morris." and noted that he knew no English.<sup>30</sup> This latter fact may account for the dramatist's silence in Section III of the poem, although it would seem there that Bunting attempted to converse in German or act as interpreter.

The poem begins on a negative note, with the "faint jazz" of the "negerband" ignored by the German bourgeoisie (jazz and poetry were linked in Bunting's mind at this time, as his article on Eliot of 1932 makes clear). In the second movement of Section I the poet and his girlfriend move to a "mediocre / neighbourhood without music." Love is reduced to kissing in the taxi, preoccupation with the social conventions, small breasts on the silver screen, and a luxurious

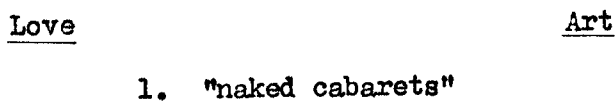
pinching of thighs below silk.

In Section II the naked cabaret, with its twin elements of sex and "art", provides a negative balance of the themes. In Section III the theme of Art is explored through a living symbol of all it is not, in Bunting's view, in the vanity, ignorance and circumspection (this quality recalling the Attis figure) of the German dramatist. As in 'Attis', the failure of artistic creativity is expressed in terms of loss of sexual fertility, as "menopause", and the poem ends on a note that combines the failure of Love and of Art: "Stillborn fecundities / frostbound applause."

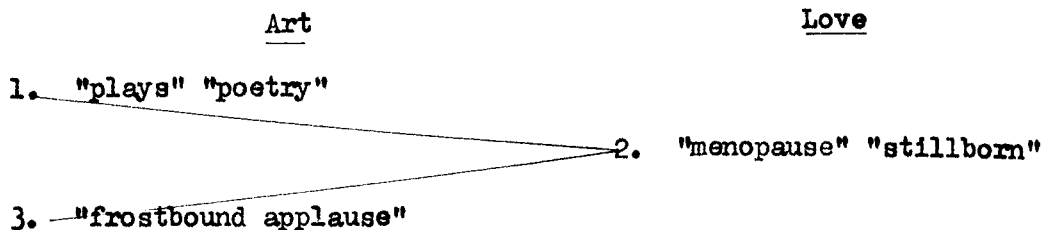
#### Section I



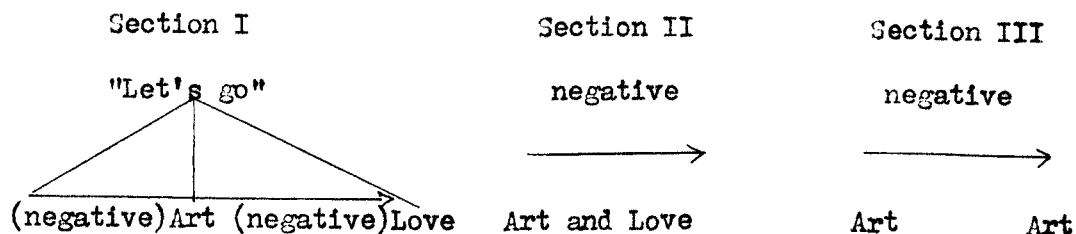
#### Section II



#### Section III



Only Section I of this Sonata seems to be in binary form, either from desire to experiment or from lack of sufficient material to fill the shape.



### 'The Well of Lycopolis'

In 'The Well of Lycopolis' Bunting brings all three themes into play, once again in their negative aspects but here with specific reference to his own life and art. It is a poem of self-laceration and, as such, the tone is uneven, by turns self-pitying and aggressive. Nevertheless he contrives a kind of balance at the end, in the doubtful positive of the final line.

Love opens Section I, in the shape, now grown ungainly, of Venus. Her thoughts of suicide and memories of war atrocities bring in the theme of Death, but the "unlovely labour of love" completes the first movement. Polymnia, the muse, introduces Art in the references to English drama (C.P., p.155) and French poetry, in "rhymed our breath" and in the "barren honesty" of the poet's (Bunting's) position in the modern movement, putting craftsmanship before social commitment. The verse paragraph which ends this section neatly combines these themes in a suitably tentative or allusive way: the "slack buttock" is clear enough, but the theme of Death is evoked in the fire "just lit and flickering out already," and that of Art in the reference to Ronsard's 'Quand vous serez bien vieille'.

The theme of Art opens Section II in the ironic literary reference of "libation." Images of weather and of navigation, however, prepare the way for a more positive view of art at the end of this section. Love is again suspect - "any girl or none" - and is opposed by the poet's desire for an art which is permanent, yet flexible enough to

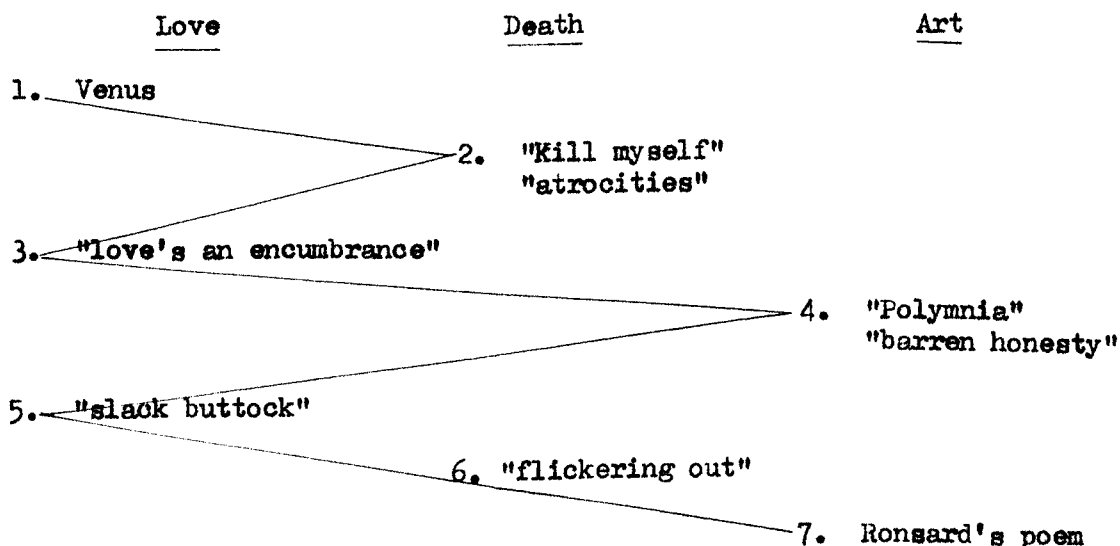
contain the world's beauty and particularity: "if the sun's lilt / could be fixed in the stone's convexity." This vision is immediately countered by the actual state of current English poetry written by the "slick lads." The second movement of the section opens with a more positive view of Love: "virgin with virgin / coupled taste / wine without headache ..." This view merges easily with an ideal art - "and the songs were simple" - but against this the poet places a city world moving towards Death, lacking bright days and green grass. The section ends with a sense of balance, however, as the negative aspects of Art (the painful disappointment involved in fidelity to certain standards of poetic craftsmanship) are not strong enough to displace the sense of courage and skill as the poet sets his course stubbornly against the trade winds of easy literary fame and fortune. Navigation as a symbol of the poet's task is at least as old as Pindar's odes, but here provides a vivid image of Bunting's technique of tacking between thematic extremes to reach some temporary harbour.

Section III finds the poet once more at odds with wind and wave, Aeolus and Ocean, but ignobly. Poetry is "infamous", love "abject": the poem as a whole reflects a crisis in Bunting's personal and creative life which resulted in marital breakdown and almost complete poetic silence. The theme of Death recurs in the "widowed tune" and is linked with Art here and in the reference to a "livery hack," but more powerfully with the decay of natural life in "Scamped spring, squandered summer, / grain, husk, stem and stubble / mildewed ..." From this point the movement of the poem careers wildly through the sexual sterility of a foolish Attis figure ("Hack off his pendants!") to the negative, because uncontrolled, Art of rejection and disgust.

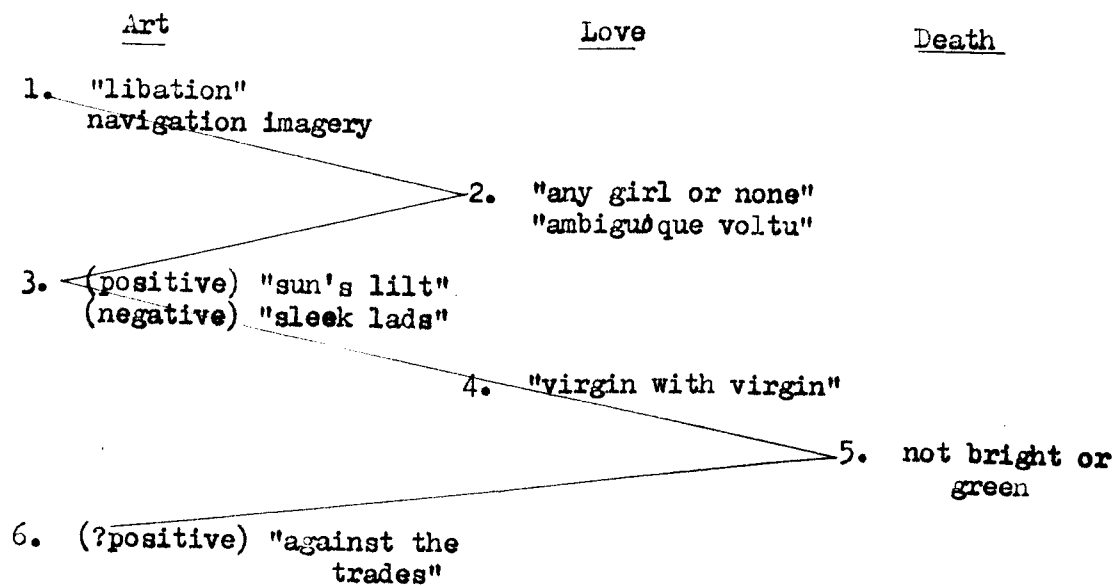
The epigraph of Section IV sets up the counter rhythm of Dante's artistic control in a similar situation, but the mood is predominantly

negative: from the Inferno to the loss of love ("Who had love for love ..?") to the perversion of the College of Muses from praise of beauty and artistic integrity to a poetry of ugliness and falsehood ("praised-for-a-guinea"). Death in war shades naturally into corruption in personal relationships ("pox" "debauched the neighbour's little girl") and the poem seems set to end in the quagmire. Yet although Bunting is negative in the description of his own work as "irresolute, barren, dependent," the final lines offer a more positive inspiration from heaven, albeit qualified: "as though Styx were silvered by a wind from Heaven." Just as Eliot's 'Four Quartets' evoke moments of vision which did not take place, which remain unattainable, so Bunting is honest enough to state that for him as yet "great" poetry - subtle, mature, buoyant, masterful - is a vision which he can glimpse or conceive of but not attain. This is as much balance as the state of his spirits permits.

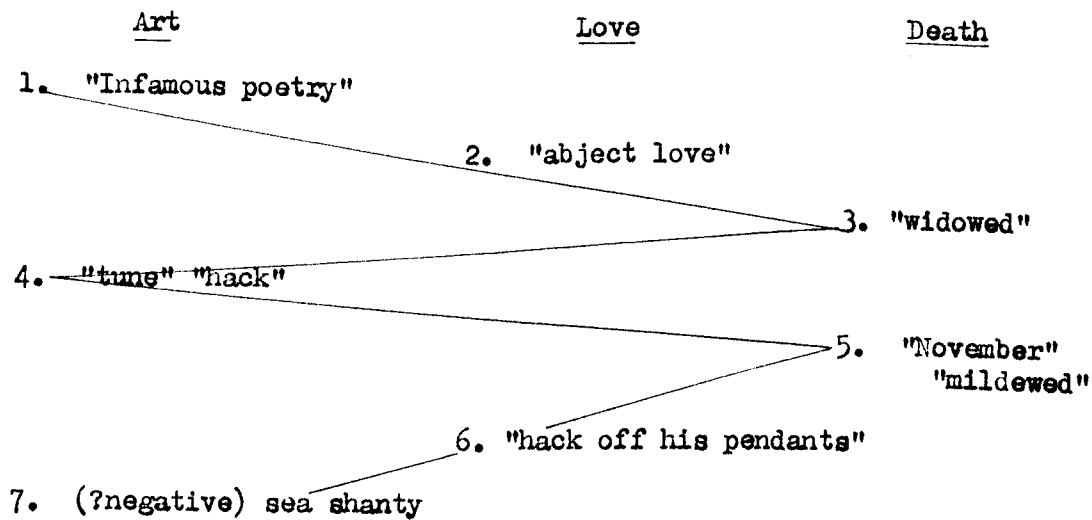
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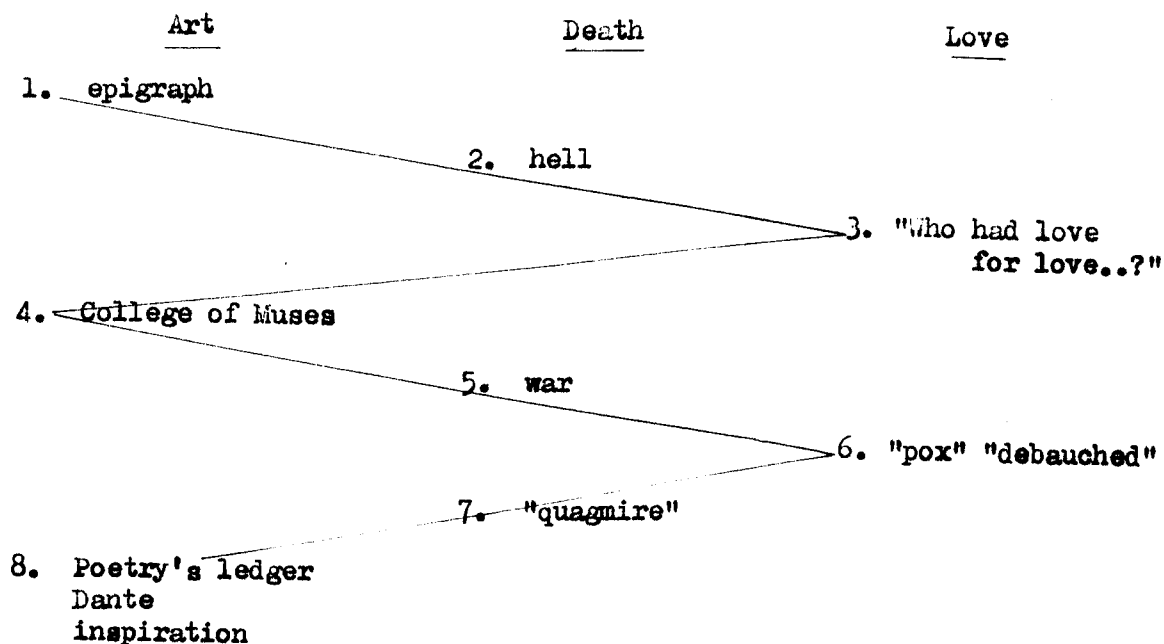
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## Section III

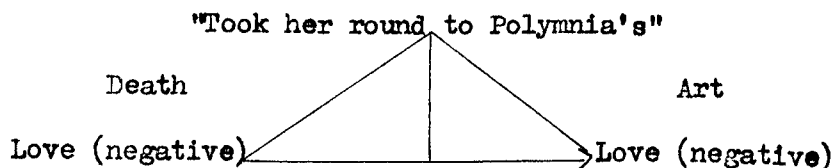


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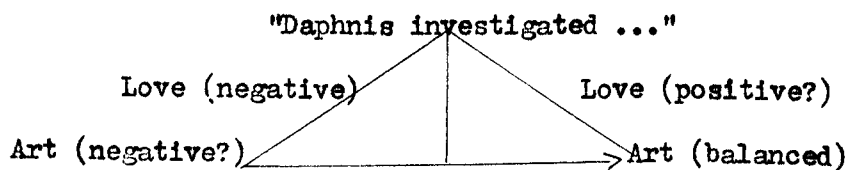


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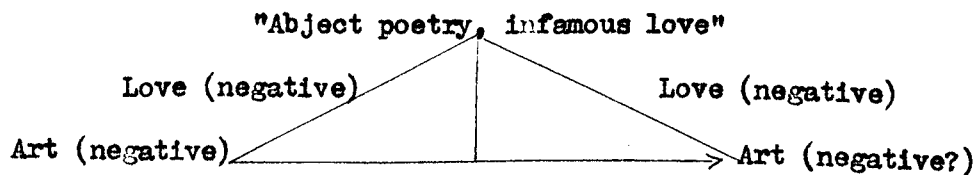
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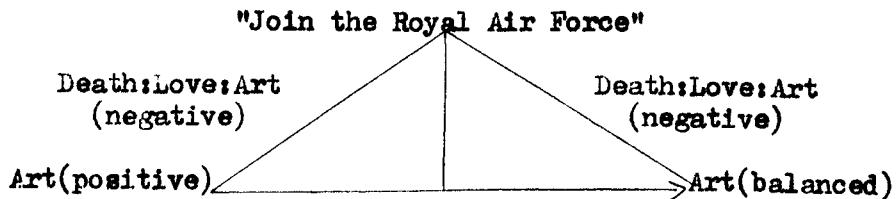


## Section III





## Section IV



## 'The Spoils'

Despite its gloomy tone, 'The Well of Lycopolis' demonstrates Bunting's growing ambition to handle the complexities of existence in a way that is formally pleasing. 'The Spoils' brings to this craftsmanship a more positive vision of the interaction of the three themes, now merely counterpointed by developments of the pre-war negative attitudes or images.

Section I deals with positive and negative aspects of Death, Love and Art. The speakers represent the various Semitic peoples: Arpachshad the Bedouin, Lud the Baghdadi or city Arab, Asshur the adventurer or merchant-soldier, and Aram the later Prophets or "the better modern Jewish mind (or emotions)." <sup>31</sup> For reasons previously discussed, Death has become "a familiar, almost a friend" who "lays his purse on the table and opens the wine." This is contrasted by the persona of Asshur who, in his preoccupation with "counting and calling the sum" carries something of the negative, anatomical attitude encountered in 'Villon'. The "brothel outside under the wall" introduces a hint of the new positive attitude towards Love and sensuality, more apparent later in the section. Destruction when the Tigris floods, the "Dead camels, dead Kurds," is overcome by the generous and life-enhancing images of the rest of Lud's speech. Arpachshad (in his adventurer rather than merchant aspect) introduces the theme of Art in the sacred poems "beating with a leaping measure," which are followed by the contrasting negative of sickly Hebrew voices.

The second movement of the section begins by recapitulating all the themes in negative: "planted ink and reaped figures" (Death); "sterile rams" and effeminate "tailors, hairdressers" (Love); and "A farthing a note for songs as of the thrush" (Art). There follows an emphasis on the positive aspects of sensuality, with repetition and variation of earlier words and images - "repugnant," "pence," "brothel," "thighs," "jet, jade," "bread from the oven" - before a recapitulation of the positive side of Death, seen as giving savour and perspective to life.

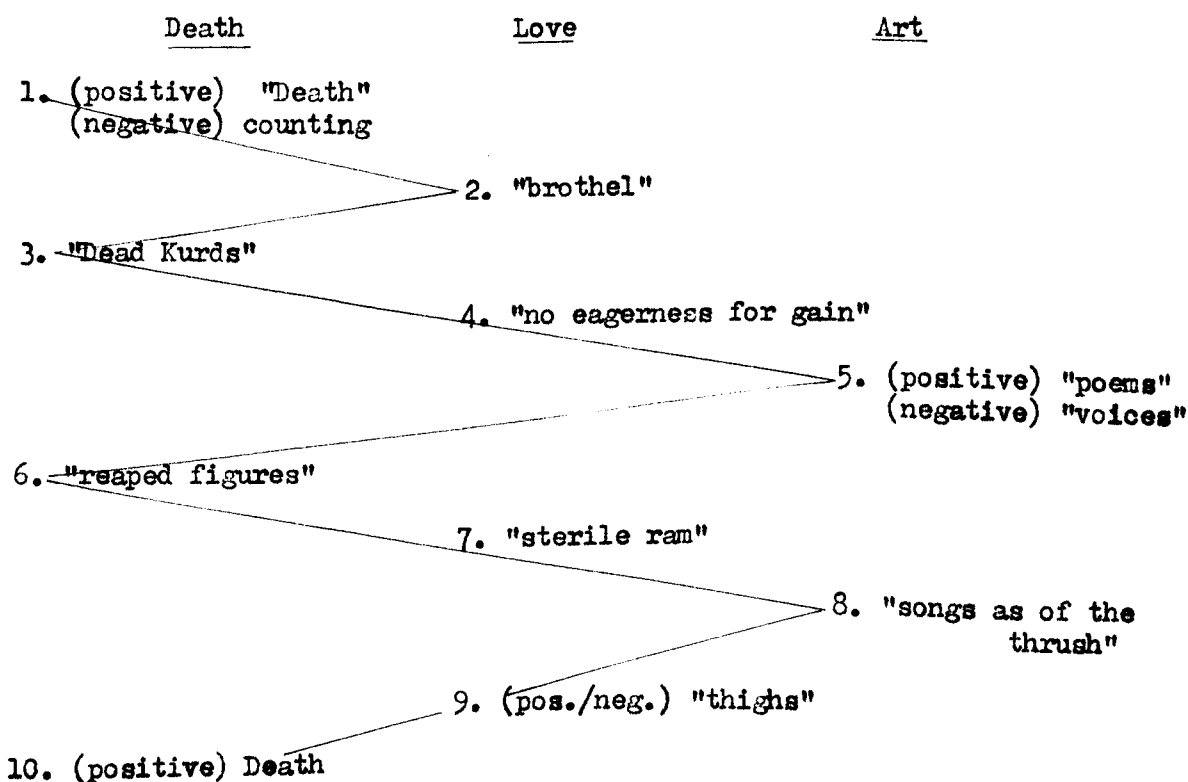
In Section II Death is the negative force against which is built the architecture of mosque and pyramid: "A hard pyramid or lasting law / against fear of death." Other arts, the flute playing of Naystani, the miniatures of Mosavvar, classical singing and storytelling, are opposed to a variety of death: "policework," "filing," "unproductive and rich." The symbol of the hawk stooping brings the section marvellously to a point of balance, unifying beginning and end not only in that "the name of Toghril, first Seljuk conqueror, means falcon," <sup>32</sup> but also in that while dealing death the hawk evokes our wonder, not only at its power but at Bunting's artistic control over his creature.

Section III also deals mainly with Death and Art, with the latter, reflecting Bunting's wartime priorities, playing a less dominant part. Love too is present only as a generalised life force. The section opens with the negative Death image of taxation - "tribute" "levy" - set in contrast to the "artesian gush of our past," a nice infusion of the sense of history and the spirit of place. A fateful list of poets, symbolising, it may be, the place of the artist in Western society, and expressed, as in 'The Well of Lycopolis', in terms of sea imagery as "flares on a foundering barque," modulates

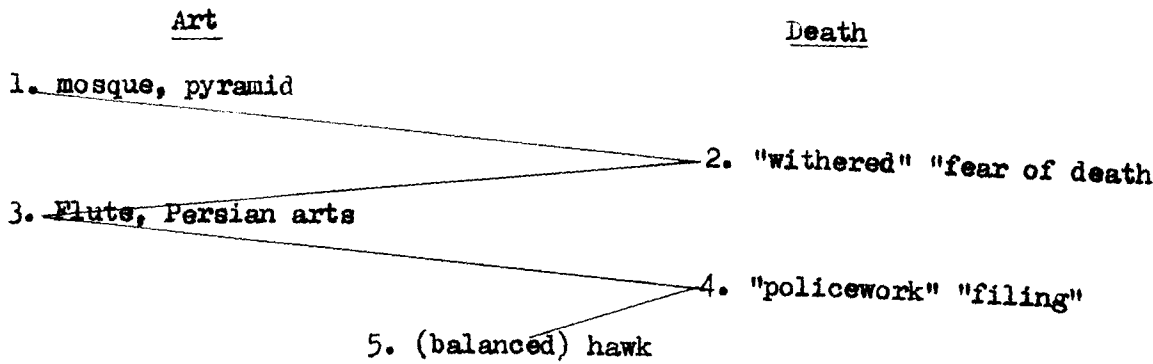
into a positive image of the gaiety and daring possible in confronting death: "was lost / in best blues and his third plane that day."

The second movement of the section opens positively, in the balance of "Broken booty but useable," and moves through the symbol of the wise blind prophet-poet to a negative aspect of death by water, "a drowned Finn, a drowned Chinese." This is in turn countered by rhythm and image: "Tide sang. Guns sang." Here Death and Art are united and the ocean is accepted and celebrated in its mystery. The sense of balance continues in the positive navigation imagery of "convoy marshalled, filing between mines." The doomed poets in their archaic "barque" seem far behind this sense of the acceptance of all that life and death make possible, which might seem to pass beyond mere literary values, were it not for Bunting's obvious care for detail, rhythm and balance.

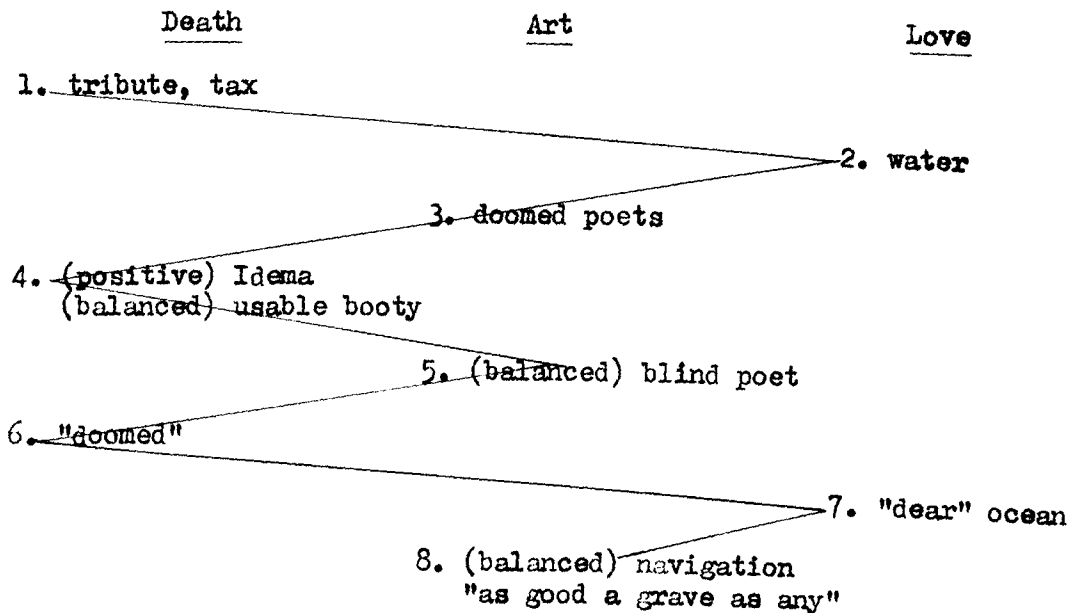
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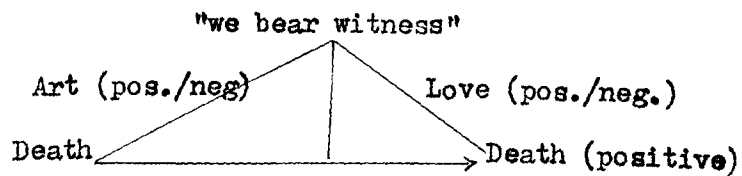


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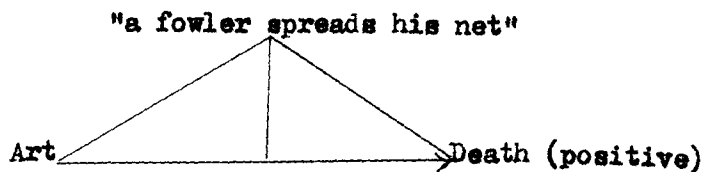


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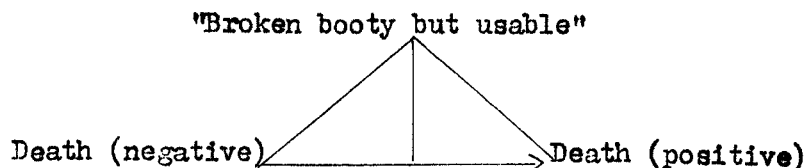
### Section I



### Section II



## Section III



## 'Briggflatts'

'Briggflatts', as Bunting's masterpiece, deserves more extended treatment, and Chapter VI is devoted to a different kind of analysis of the complexities within its form. In the interests of symmetry, however, it seems appropriate in a chapter so concerned with pattern to end with a very brief examination of Bunting's original diagram which is reproduced above (page 153). It differs from the simplified diagrams I have employed in giving the emotional rise and fall of each part of the binary form. The turning point between movements is thus located in the trough between the twin peaks, rather than at either of these peaks which mark instead the moments of highest intensity (which may in certain cases be open to debate) within each movement. The shape shown in outline below each diagram will offer a comparison with the simplified diagrams I have used elsewhere. The short discussion offers no more than the roughest outline of the general and dynamic movements within each section of this intricate poem.

Section I opens from a sense of the unity between Art and procreative energy, or Love: "Brag, sweet tenor bull / descant on Rawthey's madrigal." This unity is challenged by an awareness of Death, "In the grave's slot / he lies. We rot." The love of the two children seems to overcome this challenge.

The second movement also opens with the bull's call, but its "lament" perhaps foretells the death of the relationship, "love laid aside," and the consequences which this has in terms of loss of unity

in Nature and in Art: "Rawthey truculent, dingy../ Drudge at the mallet ..."

Section II explores the link between Art and Death. Reminiscent of the Attis figure, though with more energy, the "poet appointed" inhabits a sordid world and attempts to record it in "lines still-born". A more positive challenge to Death is offered in the vision of the Norse pilot challenging the sea - yet "Who sang, sea takes ...". The scene shifts abruptly southwards, yet here too both Love and Art prove futile in the main: the sensuality of "Amalfitan kisses" is no substitute for love, and the poet finds that "Something is lost" in his work.

The second movement begins from a positive image of Art, reminiscent of Ode 16, "Crucibles pour / sanded ingots," but as in that poem the vision cools, and the resultant "flawed fragments" are attributed not to lack of potential in the artist ("No worn tool / whittles stone") but to his "uneasy" character, linked in his lies against love with Bloodaxe's treachery, flight and death. The unity of Art and Nature is re-established in an evocation of great musicians called forth by observation of the natural world ("poinsettia on a half-tide crag, / a galliard by Byrd") but is contrasted with the sterility of this poet's garden: "But who will entune a bogged orchard ..?" He salvages some hope from the natural world of "roe," "vixen," "rat" and "spider," however, and from the final memory of Pasiphae and the god-bull which offers an awesome vision of grandeur and fear, Wordsworthian in effect if not in content.

In Section III, in a reworking of a legend from the Shahnamah, Alexander ascends through a vicious and nightmare world to a recognition of his own mortality. In the second movement, the poet, having overcome the near death of his creative instincts, finds new confidence in his

identification with his native land. The biographical reference to Bunting's own career from the late thirties to the early fifties is fairly clear.

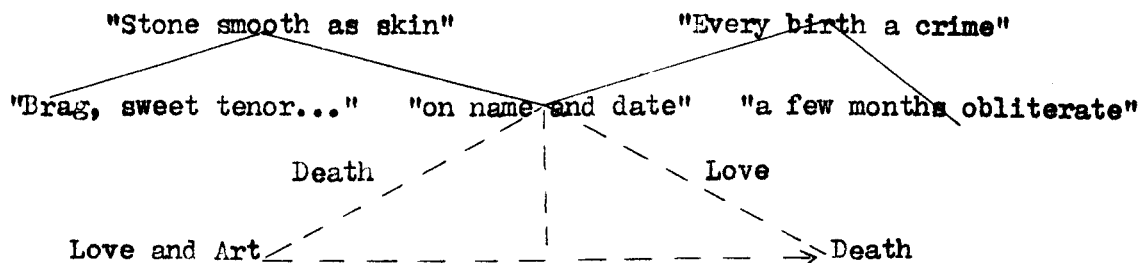
Death predominates at the start of Section IV, yet having been overcome in the previous section ("the rebate tossed to him") it is now accepted and can even be, through Art, a source of joy: "I hear Aneurin number the dead and rejoice ..." This is not to diminish the mystery and power of the creative life of the spirit, whether seen in religious terms among the saints of the Celtic Church, "Columba, Columbanus," or in artistic terms in Bunting's celebration of the subtlety of Art ("mist of spiderlines / bearing the rainbow") and contempt for critical explication: "you will understand nothing."

The second movement employs this subtlety to recreate the early love, the destruction of the relationship and its consequences for the poet. In keeping with his hard-won acceptance of Death, however, the poet finds something "valiant" in his endurance of pain and loneliness then and now.

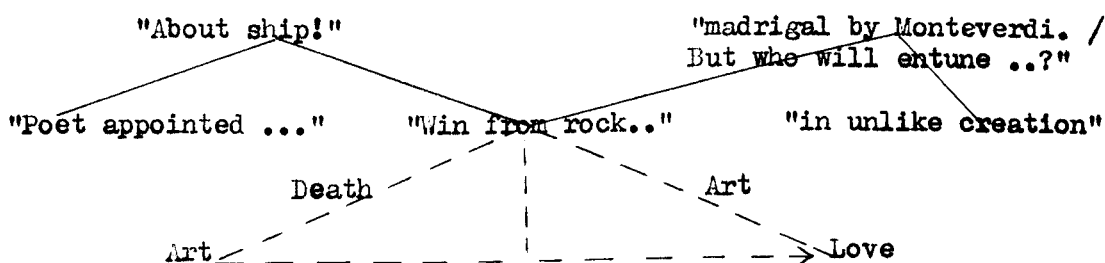
In Section V the unity of Art and Nature lost at the start of the poem is finally recovered: "Winter wrings pigment / from petal and slough ..." Echoes of earlier phrases and images combine with accurately observed new detail to reach a turning point of acceptance of all past and present life, when "Then is diffused in Now."

The second movement builds majestically, yet with an honest awareness of the old man's situation, towards the unity of Love and Death with Art in the version of Catullus which ends the poem: "For love uninterrupted night."

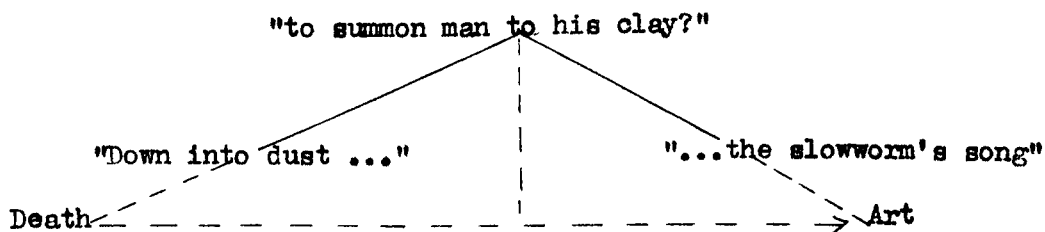
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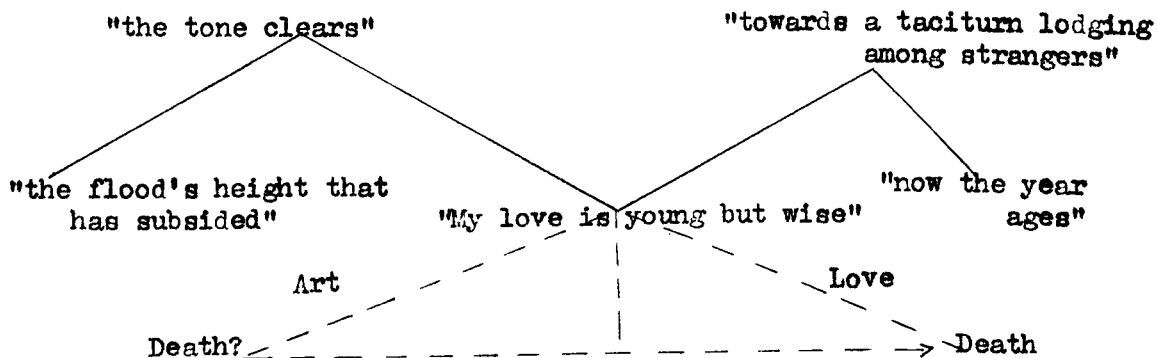
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## Section III

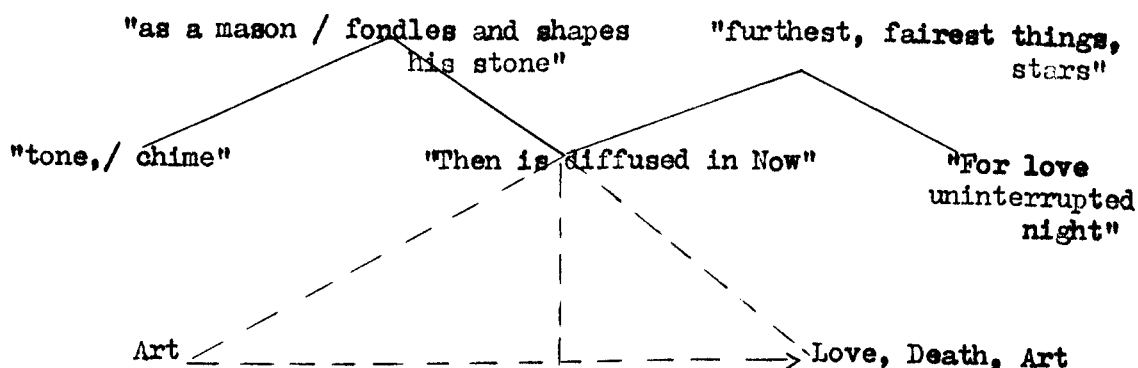


## Section IV





## Section V



While such diagrams are, admittedly, even more simplified and schematic than literary criticism customarily is, they are, I feel, useful in conveying a sense of the solid structure underlying Bunting's varied surface, and in revealing the use he has made of the sonata form to bring many elements of his experience into harmony and pattern, without sacrificing his love of contrasts. The sonata form may be, in Pound's terms, a vortex through which a variety of ideas is constantly rushing, but it is a vortex with house rules, with elegance and measure, and Bunting's attempts to find a form for modern poetry must be judged to be both original and successful. Although Pound on occasion, particularly in the early years of their composition, referred to the structure of the Cantos in diagrammatic terms, his plans seem never to have been so detailed as Bunting's and to have had less control over the material as both poet and poem developed.

NOTES TO CHAPTER V

1. George Oppen, interviewed by L.S. Dembo in an "Objectivist" issue of Contemporary Literature, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Wisconsin, 1969), p. 160.
2. Ibid., p. 161.
3. C. Reznikoff, *ibid.*, p. 194.
4. Ibid., p. 201.
5. George Oppen, *ibid.*, p. 160.
6. Ibid., p. 167.
7. Carl Rakosi, *ibid.*, p. 180.
8. C. Reznikoff, *ibid.*, p. 194.
9. Ibid., p. 197.
10. Reprinted in J.P. Sullivan, op.cit., p. 46ff.
11. Ibid., p. 53.
12. E. Miner, quoted in Sullivan, op.cit., p. 237.
13. Ezra Pound, *ibid.*, p. 51.
14. Ibid.
15. E. Miner, *ibid.*, p. 246.
16. F. Kermode, 'Dissociation of Sensibility', Kenyon Review XIX (1957), pp. 180-181. Quoted in R.H. Pearce, The Continuity of American Poetry (Princeton, 1961), pp. 94-95.
17. Discussed in R.H. Pearce, op.cit., p. 124.
18. A story recounted by Russell Banks in Madeira and Toasts for Basil Bunting's 75th Birthday, ed. J. Williams (1977).
19. Quoted in R.H. Pearce, op. cit., p. 335.
20. The reference to Bywell churchyard (C.P., p. 20) probably derives from the examples there of the ancient stonemasons' habit of indicating a woman's grave by shears (hence a link with the castration theme).
21. Quoted in R.H. Pearce, op.cit., p. 336.
22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., p.337.
24. Quoted in S.V.M. Forde, op.cit., p.26.
25. Bunting to Zukofsky, letter dated 22 March 1951. Quoted in S.V.M. Forde, op.cit., p.151.
26. Bunting to S.V.M. Forde, letter dated 23 May 1972. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.114.
27. Ibid., pp. 114-115.
28. 'Basil Bunting talks about "Briggflatts"', Georgia Straight Writing Supplement, VI (1970); Anthea Hall, op.cit.
29. C. Reznikoff, op.cit., p.196.
30. W.B. Yeats, letter to Olivia Shakspear, dated 2 March 1929 and quoted in A. Norman Jeffares, op.cit., p.153.
31. Bunting to Zukofsky, letter dated 13 March 1951. Quoted in S.V.M. Forde, op.cit., p.154.
32. Bunting to Zukofsky, letter dated 7 March 1951. Quoted in S.V.M. Forde, op.cit., pp. 176-177.

CHAPTER VI : HERMENEUTICS OF MODERNISM -

"THE SLOWWORM'S MOSAIC"

Northrop Frye and Basil Bunting share a magnificent hybris which enables them to make the largest claims for their respective arts. It issues in a firm hold on complex literary structures, a confident, often wittily arrogant style, and the ability to inspire both undying loyalty and enduring distrust. Neither, so far as I know, has had a good word to say for the other.<sup>1</sup>

The pair may be conjoined to advantage, however, in the present exercise in the hermeneutics of modernism, the basic problem in which is the problem of form: for "the paradoxical technique of the poetry which is encyclopaedic and yet discontinuous," (A.C., p.61) the technique which Bunting's Sonatas share with 'The Waste Land' and Pound's Cantos, albeit rationalized by critical theories stressing the essential discontinuity of poetry, makes more difficult than ever the critical effort to unite the symbols of a literary work towards some simultaneous perception of the unity of its structure.

Yvor Winters has not been alone in expressing dissatisfaction at the vagaries of "imitative form." At the outset of his career, Bunting felt that modern poetry lacked form, and sought in his analogies of musical forms to find a balance between the sharp contrasts of rhythm and texture which he admired in Eliot and others and the formal organisation of experience which art demands (since, in Blake's words, "every poem must necessarily be a perfect unity"). As we have seen, the sonata form accommodated a dialectical organisation of theme and countertheme, but any attempts to demonstrate a closer relationship between, say, 'Briggflatts' and Scarlatti's B minor Fugato sonata remain unconvincing and, indeed, are doomed to fail since there is no one to

one relationship between the poetry and the music in this case, as Bunting is the first to point out.

The organisation of Bunting's work is, rather, exclusively literary and traditional beneath its idiosyncratic surface, the authors whom he duly cites in his Preface to Collected Poems having taught him more than we gather from his phrase "the trick of it," the trick of poetry.

It is here that Northrop Frye comes in, the advantage of the meeting accruing as much to our reading of Anatomy of Criticism as to our understanding of Bunting's work: the proof of Frye's critical pudding being, so to say, in its ability to help us to savour in a new way the complex metabolic structures of Bunting's poems, a *mélange* whose external decoration of sonority, clarity of imagery and so forth, has been much admired, but whose internal consistency yet lightness of texture has never been fully proven (vide Porter et al., Chapter III above).

In a similar way, Northrop Frye's terminology - the wheeling galaxy of his critical system - has often been viewed with the suspicion that it adumbrates the rough hewn, the peculiar and particular qualities of literary experience, that it illumines, indeed, only as starlight illumines. His system needs the exploratory probing which particular poems can give at least as much as our fuller understanding of Bunting's poems demands the boldness of critical approach which Frye offers.

If we begin, then, by taking a broad historical look at the form of 'Briggflatts' - in terms of Frye's historical criticism or "theory of modes" - we may say that the poem is a "sentimental" romance written in and for an ironic age. The term "sentimental" refers to "a later recreation of an earlier mode" (A.C., p.35): Romanticism is a "sentimental" recreation of romance and the fairy tale is a "sentimental" form of folk-tale. The poem may be assigned to the romance mode

primarily (to follow Frye's markers) in that its hero, the poet, is superior in degree to other men (by virtue of his calling) and to his environment (by virtue of his willingness and ability to meet the challenge of its different moods, friendly or hostile); the actions of the hero are marvellous (including change of identity: Bloodaxe, Norse pilot, Alexander, tenor bull, or rat, or wise old prophet figure - all are aspects of the poet's persona); and he moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended: "where every bough repeated the slowworm's song" ... "and stars and lakes / echo him and the copse drums out his measure, / snow peaks are lifted up in moonlight and twilight ..." Prodigious of courage and endurance, unnatural to us, are natural to the hero:

Where rats go go I  
accustomed to penury,  
filth, disgust and fury

since "poet appointed dare not decline" to carry out, whatever his misgivings, "the mission imposed," the recreation and thence redemption of his life through his art:

shall I see Autumn out  
or the fifty years at risk  
be lost, doubt  
end what's begun?

The prevailing mood of various parts of the poem, further, is accounted for by its romance mode. The hero's death or isolation - here his isolation as an artist - "has the effect of a spirit passing out of nature, and evokes a mood best described as elegiac" (A.C., p.36):

Stars disperse. We too  
further from neighbours  
now the year ages.

(C.P., p.67)

Mist sets lace of frost  
for the tide to mangle.  
Day is wreathed in what summer lost.

(C.P., p.68)

The sense of resignation in the final lines of the poem at the passing of time takes its place too in the elegiac mood:

Fifty years a letter unanswered;  
a visit postponed for fifty years.

She has been with me fifty years.

Starlight quivers. I had day enough.  
For love uninterrupted night.

(C.P., p.70)

This elegiac aspect of romance, presenting "a heroism unspoilt by irony," (A.C., p.36) found for example in the death of Beowulf, reminds us of Bunting's fondness for medieval literature - for the Norse sagas, thought by Kenneth Cox to have had an influence on the rhythmical pattern of his lines, for the Spanish cantar, El Libro de Alexandre, which provided the epigraph for 'Briggflatts', or for the persona of ancient Northumbrian scop which contributes to the tone of its final section.

It is interesting to note, too, in connection with the unironic sense of acceptance of life and death in Bunting's post-war poetry, the tendency of romance to express pity and terror as forms of pleasure rather than pain: "It turns fear at a distance, or terror, into the adventurous; fear at contact, or horror, into the marvellous; and fear without an object, or dread (Angst), into a pensive melancholy" (A.C., p.37). All these transpositions of fear are to be found, for example, in the final lines of the second section of 'The Spoils', the melancholy "were we not better dead?" preceded by the adventurous and succeeded by the marvellous:

Have you seen a falcon stoop  
accurate, unforeseen  
and absolute, between  
wind-ripples over harvest? Dread  
of what's to be, is and has been -  
were we not better dead?  
His wings churn air  
to flight

Feathers alight  
 with sun, he rises where  
 dazzle rebuts our stare,  
 wonder our fright.

(C.P., p.44)

The main difference between Bunting's pre-war and post-war poetry, indeed, lies in the comparative lack of irony in the later work. Irony, here, may be shading into myth, in accordance with Frye's cyclical scheme of modes. Certainly Bunting is concerned at the present moment with the problem of myth in poetry in his work on 'A New Moon': "My difficulty may be to hide the myth in something more ready to the contemporary mind."<sup>2</sup> It would be extremely unlikely, however, that irony would disappear completely, and the hero of 'Briggflatts' retains something of the character of the pharmakos, the scapegoat or random victim which the ironic tone lends to domestic tragedy. Frye cites as examples, besides Hardy's Tess, Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, and Melville's Billy Budd, "stories of artists whose genius makes them Ishmaels of a bourgeois society," (A.C., p.41) - a persona very close to Bunting's heart, and experience, in the twenties:

The Lady asked the Poet:  
 Why do you wear your raincoat in the drawing-room?  
 He answered: Not to show  
 my arse sticking out of my trousers.

(C.P., p.98)

This persona also figures in the "autobiography" of 'Briggflatts':

Shamble, cold, content with beer and pickles,  
 towards a taditurn lodging among strangers.

(C.P., p.66)

The poem itself, however, by virtue of the fact that it has been successfully brought to completion, however, is less ironic tragedy than comedy, in Frye's generalised sense of the term as reflecting "the integration of society" through "incorporating a central character into it" (A.C., p.43). "It is the poem we have been waiting for all our lives,"



said Gail Turnbull, and Bunting had been waiting, too, for fifty years to create a work "which might stand beside the best of Scarlatti." <sup>3</sup>

At the end of the poem, the work is printed:

The sheets are gathered and bound,  
the volume indexed and shelved,  
dust on its marbled leaves.

(C.P., p.70)

While the sense of completion here is already shading into the idea of something finished, dead, and thus providing the new impetus for exploration felt in the Coda, the leaves are "marbled" not merely because they constitute a memorial to past life but because this book takes its place among the monumental texts in the tradition envisaged by Eliot. In addition, in completing Bunting's life's work, the poem reaches back past "the white marble .../ cleft in Apuan Alps" (C.P., p.57) and the stone-working mason, through the "pencil of arches sprouting / from a short pier" in 'The Spoils' II, and the desire that "the sun's lilt / could be fixed in the stone's convexity" in 'The Well of Lycopolis' (C.P., p.32) to those limbs "more marble hard / than girls imagined by Mantegna" (C.P., p.17) at the start of Bunting's writing career. That is to say, leaving aside the Coleridgean implications of these white structures built of stone, 'Briggflatts' is the coping stone by which the arch of the Collected Poems stands or falls:

stone shouldering stone, the dice  
polished alike, there is  
no cement seen and no gap  
between stones as the frieze strides  
to the impending apse ...

(C.P., p.121)

'Briggflatts', then, is comic in the sense that a vision long sought for is at last attained. The theme and form of comedy in Frye's scheme, the integration of society and the incorporation of the hero in it, are found in the poem in their Christian shape of salvation or assumption.

This is not surprising given the formative influences of the Bible and of Dante's on Bunting's work; the images of apotheosis, of stars and music playing in the final section of the poem, which have troubled at least one critic, find their place naturally here:

Great strings next the post of the harp  
clang, the horn has majesty,  
flutes flicker in the draft and flare.  
Orion strides over Farnes.

(C.P., p.70)

In one sense the poet-hero is accepted in to the society of great writers, the Tradition mentioned above, because of his achievement: an integration or initiation through art. In a much more direct way the final section of the poem celebrates a return to the society on which the poet had turned his back as a young man: to "Tweed and Till and Teviotdale," to "Redesdale and Coquetdale." Preserving the introversion of the elegiac tone, however, the poem evokes the pastoral and with it the theme of escape from society in another, pejorative sense - from the bogus metropolitan society of Section II of the poem (11.1-23) and of the pre-war Sonatas - in its idealization of simple country living and pleasant pastures:

Shepherds follow the links,  
sweet turf studded with thrift;  
fell-born men of precise instep  
leading demure dogs ...

(C.P., p.69)

Such pastoral imagery is often used in the Bible, of course, for the theme of salvation.

The interconnections of myth, romance, comedy and irony so far may seem confused or confusing, but we may take some heart from Frye's injunction to learn to recombine modes once they have been distinguished: "For while one mode [here romance] constitutes the underlying tonality of a work of fiction, any or all of the other four [mythic, high and

low mimetic, and ironic] <sup>4</sup> may be simultaneously present. Much of our sense of the subtlety of great literature comes from this modal counterpoint" (A.C., p.50).

The subtlety of combination is not in dispute in 'Briggflatts': critics have had great difficulty in satisfactorily accounting for the poem - and for its author. Particular analysis of the elements of comedy in the poem will appear later in the chapter. At present, something further can be learned about the man and the work by examining the "thematic mode" in which he is writing.

As soon as the personality of the writer appears in the work, a relationship with the reader begins to obscure the fictional element, the story or plot. Partly for this reason, in lyric poetry the main interest usually lies (pace Bunting's emphasis on qualities of sound) in the Aristotelian dianoia or theme. Though "clearly there is no such thing as a fictional or a thematic work of literature," Frye admits (A.C., p.53), equally clearly some works are fictional and others thematic in their main emphasis.

In thematic literature, he points out, the poet may write either as an individual or as a spokesman of his society, the former attitude (the "episodic" tendency) producing most lyrics, a good deal of satire, epigrams and occasional pieces, the latter (the "encyclopaedic" tendency) producing "poetry which is educational in the broadest sense: epics of the more artificial or thematic kind ... encyclopaedic compilations of myth, folklore and legend like those of Ovid and Snorri, where, though the stories themselves are fictional, the arrangement of them and the motive for collecting them is thematic" (A.C., p.54).

The relevance of this distinction to Bunting's work lies in the way it helps us to understand the differences of attitude, form and style between the pre-war and the post-war poems. "The frequency of

the moods of protest, complaint, ridicule and loneliness (whether bitter or serene)" (A.C., p.54) mark the early work as episodic, as does the tendency to discontinuous form. When the poet, however, communicates as the professional man with a social function, he tends to seek more extended patterns. Now Bunting is above all known as a professional poet, with a more or less public role as, for many, the "grand old man" of British poetry, having moved out of isolation in recent years for public readings, university appointments, and to assume the presidency of the Poetry Society and the chairmanship of the Northern Arts association (this despite his earlier criticism of such public bodies). It was a process which began when he became a professional soldier and diplomat, and it could be argued that some renewed sense of social function may have played its part not only in the use of the extended pattern of the recurrent seasons in 'Briggflatts', and the long journey from East to West in 'The Spoils', but also in the more continuous tone and form of "Second Book of Odes", so different from the mercurial and various early odes. The tone is, in general, celebratory (even the satirical 'What the Chairman Told Tom' is remarkably good humoured) and the form spare, yet powerful in effect:

Three Michael daisies  
 on an ashtray;  
 one abets love;  
 one droops and woos;  
  
 one stiffens her petals  
 remembering  
 the root, the sap  
 and the bees' play.

(C.P., p.126)

Another important principle in Frye's view of the thematic mode is "a conception of a total body of vision that poets as a whole class are entrusted with, a total body tending to incorporate itself in a single encyclopaedic form, which can be attempted by one poet if he is

sufficiently learned or inspired, or by a poetic school or tradition if the culture is sufficiently homogeneous" (A.C., p.55).

The lack of such a homogeneous culture, of course, led to the lively professorial edicts which emanated from what Pound liked to call the Ezraversity. Bunting was the foremost young scholar enrolled there in Rapallo, though he showed enough independence of mind to acquire and adapt the method rather than merely absorb the message. It was only by the age of sixty-five that Bunting, after a lifetime of study, felt himself sufficiently learned or inspired to produce his most encyclopaedic work. Peter Porter's dismissal of the persona of 'Briggflatts' as "a prophet who has read a lot," although intended as an insult, is close to the facts of literary experience and to Bunting's intention. Porter's quarrel here is with literary history rather than with Bunting. "Prophet", to be sure, gives a too Biblical or mythical emphasis to the hero's role: "in other modes we should expect to find encyclopaedic forms which constitute a series of increasingly human analogies of mythical or scriptural revelation" (A.C., p.56).

And this is, indeed, exactly what we do find if we look at 'Briggflatts' in terms of the romance mode to which we have assigned it. In the romance the prime function of the poet is to remember: lists of kings, myths, historical traditions, the proverbs of popular wisdom, the deeds of tribal heroes - and these are all part of Bunting's word-board too, albeit presented in analogues suited to the modern mind. Hence "Bloodaxe, king of York, / king of Dublin, king of Orkney" in Section I, for example; hence the Pasiphae incident in Section II; and "Baltic plainsong speech" (I); "Applewood, hard to rive" (IV); Alexander "scrutinising holds while day lasted / groping for holds in the dark" (III). If "Sirius is too young to remember," Bunting is not, and the late recognition of the importance of memory and the recreation

of his own past led him to adapt the traditional forms and content of the romance mode in his greatest poem, in which he finally recorded his debt to "Peggy Greenbank and her whole ambience, the Rawthey valley, the fells of Lunedale, the Viking inheritance all spent save the faint smell of it, the ancient Quaker way of life accepted without thought and without suspicion that it might seem eccentric; and what happens when one deliberately thrusts love aside, as I then did - it has its revenge. That must be a longish poem." <sup>5</sup>

But the poem is not merely personal reminiscence. The range of reference, as of poetic technique displayed, shows Bunting to be adopting the role of "the medieval minstrel with his repertory of memorised stories," or "the clerical poet who, like Gower or the author of the Cursor Mundi, tries to get everything he knows into one vast poem or poetic testament" (A.C., p.57).

Further, Bunting's concern and care to render accurately the "facts" of experience suggest that for a "Northumbrian Quaker atheist" (Jonathan Williams's phrase) the encyclopaedic knowledge he displays is seen, at least to some extent, sacramentally, as "a human analogy of divine knowledge" (A.C., p.57). The only contemporary British poet, interestingly enough, for whom Bunting expressed any deep admiration to me in a recent visit was David Jones, the artist and poet who strongly reflected in his work a sense of the relatedness of art and sacrament. Similarities of form and technique link the two poets; past and present people and events march side by side in the work of both in their attempts to establish a mythic perspective in which to place their experience of life. Yet against a textured and allusive background, details of the physical world are sharply rendered. Their apparent eclecticism arises not from fragmentation or despair or irony but from a commitment to discover or recover origins. Both poets return to early

English and Celtic literature (Y Goddodin in particular) with the result that their modern heroes are, in Bernard Bergonzi's words, "in some measure transfigured by the light of earlier heroes." <sup>6</sup>

It may be, too, that a deeper philosophical view links them, despite Bunting's atheism. If In Parenthesis "resorts for its meaning to the central act of the Christian faith - the sacrament of the Holy Mass - as an anamnesis, a recalling or re-presenting of an event in the past so that it becomes here and now operative by its effects." <sup>7</sup> then 'Briggflatts' may be said to proffer a secular salvation in which central events of Bunting's past are recalled and redeemed through the admission of guilt and the ritual of art, so that "Then is diffused in Now."

Much is to be endured, however, before such redemption comes. In the nomadic world of the heroes of romance the poet is often a wanderer, and Bunting, by virtue of the hazard of life as much as by adherence to literary type (though the force of the latter should never be left out of account in the life of a literary man) fits easily into the role of the blind wandering minstrel traditional in Greek and Celtic literature: "Blind we follow ..." Even a congenital deficiency, his acute shortsightedness, is turned to advantage here, for when this poet says "blind" he is speaking from experience in this as in all things. (The "slowworm", used as a symbol of the poet-hero, is traditionally known in country districts as the blindworm).

Despite his inherited weakness, then, - to a certain extent in reaction against it - Bunting became a wanderer. Like the Goliardic satirists he roamed over Europe; like Dante he was in exile, though for economic rather than political reasons. It is no wonder, then, that his "autobiography" takes the great fictional form of romance, that of the marvellous journey, "the one formula that is never exhausted" (A.C., p.57). Nor are we surprised that this fiction is employed as a

parable in Bunting's definitive encyclopaedic poem in the romance mode as it is in Dante's Commedia, a parable of the creative life.

### Forms within form

Northrop Frye suggests that "while there may be a great variety of episodic forms in any mode, in each mode we may attach a special significance to the particular episodic form that seems to be the germ out of which the encyclopaedic forms develop" (A.C., p.56). The typical episodic theme of romance he finds to be the theme of "the boundary of consciousness, the sense of the poetic mind as passing from one world to another, or as simultaneously aware of both," (A.C., p.57) and this theme is explored through the typical forms he calls the poem of exile, the poem of vision and the poem of revelation.

Before dealing with these episodic forms in relation to Bunting's encyclopaedic work, 'Briggflatts', it should firstly be noted that the theme of the boundary of consciousness helps explain the important place given to music in Collected Poems, since "music is perhaps the bridge between consciousness and the unthinking sentient or even insentient universe," as Pound suggests in his discussion of Melopoeia, or poetry on the borders of music.

The exploration of consciousness, the simultaneous awareness of different worlds, of course, relates not only to the sacramental view of art referred to above, but is central also to the modernist aesthetic of Eliot and Pound:

Hang it all, Robert Browning,  
there can be but the one 'Sordello'.  
But Sordello, and my Sordello?  
Lo Sordels si fo di Mantovana.

(Canto II)

In his insistent writing of poetry on the borders of music, Bunting has also taken up Eliot's idea that the meaning of a poem is only there like the meat for the guard dog while the reader's real affections are stolen



unawares, subconsciously, by the rhythms of the poem, the "meaning" of poetry lying, as he says in 'A Statement', in "the relation to one another of lines and patterns of sound ... which the reader feels rather than understands ..." This uncompromising view of the music of poetry does suggest why the poems are, in my experience, difficult to get by heart from start to finish, despite their clarity, let alone to analyse: like music they present the subtle configuration of emotions, not the analysis of them, contrasting sounds and images cohering by virtue of the thematic key, or by the modality of the piece, whether these terms are used in the musical or the literary critical sense.

Returning to the romance mode, then, we see how in Bunting's poetry this mode easily accommodates itself to interests and ideas - consciousness, experimentation in rhythm, the relationship between poetry and music - current in the ironic age in which he wrote, an example of the modal counterpointing mentioned above. The shaping power of the romance mode in his work, however, can be judged from an examination of the influence of the episodic forms of the mode.

The first of these, the poem of exile, the lay of the Widsith or wayfarer, "normally contrasts the worlds of memory and of experience" (A.C., p.57). Such a contrast is clear in the change from the evocation of innocence in Section I of 'Briggflatts' to the strategies of experience revealed in Section II:

to humiliate love, remember  
nothing.

. . . . .

Something is lost  
when wind, sun, sea upbraid  
justly an unconvinced deserter.

(C.P., p.57)

The contrast is also strongly expressed in the final section of the poem:

Fingertips touched and were still  
 fifty years ago.  
 Sirius is too young to remember.

(C.P., p.70)

The poet is by this point no longer in exile, however, so some other formal force must be at work here, in particular the poem of vision.

The poem of vision is conventionally dated on a May morning:

Dance tiptoe, bull,  
 black against may,  
 ridiculous and lovely  
 chase hurdling shadows  
 morning into noon.

(C.P., p.51)

It characteristically "contrasts the worlds of experience and dream" (A.C., p.57). We can see this happen most clearly in an early Ode which evokes the visionary experience of artistic creation and laments its transience, in Ode 15 or, more succinctly, in its original appendix Ode 16:

Molten pool, incandescent spilt of  
 deep cauldrons - and brighter nothing is -  
 cast and cold, your blazes extinct and  
 no turmoil or peril left you,  
 rusty ingot, bleak paralysed blob!

(C.P., p.102)

Is the flux of creation, then, merely a dream world from which we are rudely awakened to the "rust" of time and decay, or to a poem which "looks well on the page, but never / well enough"? The maturer vision of 'Briggflatts' suggests not. The poem opens as a poem of vision, but the vision is no longer that of artistic vision per se: rather it is a vision of the roots of creativity in personal experience and social relationships. Although the poet cut himself off from those roots to widen his experience in the interests of his artistic development lest

insufferable happiness impede  
 flight to Stainmore  
 to trace  
 lark, mallet,  
 becks, flocks,  
 and axe knocks

the original vision and the sense of community from which it sprang has been strongly enough recreated by the final section for the poet to state with confidence, "Then is Now." Vision and experience, that is to say, have become one in the act of creation.

The union is momentary, of course, as the Coda suggests: new work awaits completion, new ways must be explored:

A strong song tows  
us, long earsick ...

But the future is faced stoically, without the despair, the sense of inadequacy or futility found in the earlier Sonatas:

Night, float us.  
Offshore winds, shout ...

(C.P., p.71)

Since this mature vision is achieved through the enduring influence of love, the poem must bear some relation to the final episodic form current in the romance mode, the poem of revelation through female or divine grace which "contrasts the old dispensation with the vita nuova" (A.C., p.58).

This influence is most clearly seen in Section IV where appropriately Biblical imagery and rhythms (the Song of Solomon mingling with the description of the ideal wife in the Book of Proverbs) celebrate the life offered by the woman's love:

The fells reek of her hearth's scent,  
her girdle is greased with lard;  
hunger is stayed on her settle, lust in her bed.

(C.P., p.66)

This is contrasted in the same section of the poem with the dispensation brought about by the hero's decision to turn his back on this female grace, to

Shamble, cold, content with beer and pickles,  
towards a taciturn lodging among strangers.

The phrase "taciturn lodging" here accurately sums up the cost of his action in terms both of personal unease and artistic sterility. By the final section of the poem the value of the new life has been accepted, and we may detect quiet echoes of the contrast between old and new in the closing lines:

Furthest, fairest things, stars, free of our humbug,  
each his own, the longer known the more alone

where the humbug of earthly life is contrasted with the new apotheosis of starlight; and again in the line of almost astonished realisation,

She has been with me fifty years

that the possibility of salvation both in terms of personal integrity and of artistic achievement had lain unrecognised so long, though carried in the memory of the hero through all his wanderings.

Examination of the episodic poetic forms of exile, vision and revelation, then, does help us to understand the germination of 'Briggflatts' and to see why the poem begins and ends as it does. Consideration of the poem as romance, it will be seen, helps explain its content, form and style in a way which accurately places Bunting's achievement and shows it to be neither eccentric, nor narrow, nor falsely archaised, but a profound exploration and re-working of his own experience both of life and of art. In the poetic form chosen as much as in the early experiences described, Bunting returns to the roots of things.

To say this is not to deny but rather to put into the right perspective the obvious influences on his poetry of, in Frye's terms, the "low mimetic mode" of Romanticism, in the centrality of the theme of the creative individual, or of the "ironic mode" of the twentieth century, in the theme of what Hugh Kenner, in The Pound Era, has called the aesthetic of glimpses, that modernist emphasis on the timeless

moments of revelation or epiphany set in contrast to the processes of history and culture which these moments both exemplify and, somehow, explain. This latter theme is especially evident in 'The Spoils' and 'Briggflatts'.

It is interesting to note that in the latter poem the customary stress of the ironic mode on the artist as invisible craftsman is less in evidence, the poet-hero coming to the fore, although elsewhere in Collected Poems the poet is often to be imagined behind the work paring his fingernails, or, more often, wishing he had fingernails left to pare, so long is the crafter to learner:

our fingers bleed  
under the nail  
when we reef.

(C.P., p.32)

The re-emergence of the poet as creative individual is not, again, to be taken as a sentimental return to a false nineteenth century Romanticism, but as a necessary consequence of a return to the romance mode by the nearest way, the low mimetic - although personal and literary history, as usual in Bunting's case, tend to merge:

The Poet wandering on, through Arabia  
And Persia, and the wild Carmanian waste,  
And o'er the aerial mountains which pour down  
Indus and Oxus from their icy caves,  
In joy and exultation held his way ...

('Alastor; Or, The Spirit of Solitude')

### The cyclical symbolism of 'Briggflatts'

If 'Briggflatts' is properly assigned to the romance mode, we may expect that the most useful critical approach to its symbols will be Frye's archetypal criticism, which "seems to find its centre of gravity in the mode of romance, when the interchange of ballads, folktales, and popular stories was at its easiest" (A.C., p.116).

In this section it seems best to abandon the logical critical

sequence and to offer the proof before turning to the premise of the archetype on which it is based. There are two reasons for this: firstly, with regard to explication of the premise, it would be foolish to attempt to match that peculiar stylistic mixture of suavity and sagacity by means of which Northrop Frye carries the buoyant reader through the literary rapids of archetypal theory; secondly, and in default of this saving grace, it seems unwise to have even the willing reader suspend his disbelief for any longer than is necessary. Ignore, for the moment, the mechanics of the contraption: let's see if it works.

Perhaps it will be sufficient, then, to mark out at this point those areas where archetypal criticism impinges on problematic aspects of Bunting's poetry which we have already encountered, before going on to demonstrate the value of this type of criticism in an examination of the form of 'Briggflatts'. Chapter VII will return to a more detailed examination of archetypal imagery in its relation to Bunting's poetry as a whole.

The archetype is a typical or recurring image, a communicable unit. Archetypal criticism is thus concerned "with the social aspect of poetry, with poetry as the focus of a community" (A.C., p.99), and this is obviously of interest in relation to Bunting's post-war emphasis on society, whether eastern in 'The Spoils' or northern in 'Briggflatts'.

The whole problem of convention is involved here, since this is a matter of making art communicable, and thus the question of the extent and relevance of Bunting's borrowings from other poets, as well as of the type of communication he desires or achieves in his poetry.

The elements of recurrence which Frye stresses in the archetypal view of poetry, of rituals associated with the crucial periods of time and experience - the cyclical movements of the sun, the moon, the

seasons and human life, of dawn, sunset, seedtime and harvest, the equinoxes and solstices, birth, initiation, marriage and death - strike us as particularly relevant to Bunting's work, since the experience of these events forms the basic content of his later poetry.

In addition to such cyclical movements, Frye also deals with a dialectical movement between elements of desire and repugnance. Such interplay of desirable dream and painful or disappointing reality might suggest that the positive/negative dialectical pattern of theme and countertheme in the Sonatas may be more fundamental to literary experience than the reader would at first suppose.

Frye's placing of myth as the identification of ritual (linked with recurrent movements) and dream (linked with the conflict between repugnance and desire) will also suggest something to us on the problems of modern mythopoeia and Bunting's solution to these problems through displacement, those technical devices employed in making plausible the use of a mythical structure in realistic fiction. Myth and naturalism are the two extremes of literary design, and between them lies that tendency of romance "to displace myth in a human direction and yet, in contrast to 'realism', to conventionalise content in an idealized direction" (A.C., p.137). The central principle of displacement, Frye considers, "is that what can be metaphorically identified in a myth can only be linked in romance by some form of simile: analogy, significant association, incidental accompanying imagery, and the like" (A.C., p.137). Thus the mythical sun-god becomes in romance a person significantly associated with the sun. Bunting's early desire to have sun-like powers,

if the sun's lilt  
could be fixed in the stone's convexity  
(C.P., p.32)

although this seemed then an impossibility,

Every thrust of the autumn sun  
cuckolding  
in the green grin of late flowering trees.  
I shall never have anything to myself ...

(C.P., p.33)

nevertheless becomes a literary reality in, for example, the

Solstice past,  
years end crescendo

of Section V of 'Briggflatts' - although I doubt if he'd thank us for saying so.

Finally, the employment of archetypal criticism makes it possible for the first time to take a coherent view both of the imagery of Collected Poems and of that book's structure, since "The first and most striking unit of poetry larger than the individual poem is the total work of the man who wrote the poem" (A.C., p.110). It might be objected that Bunting is not yet dead, but he seems to invite us to take such a synoptic view in the opening words of his Preface: "A man who collects his poems screws together the boards of his coffin."

And so to work, by noting, firstly, that a cyclical movement is the fundamental form of process - success alternating with decline, effort with response, life with death.

Cyclical symbols abound in 'Briggflatts' and, as is customary, they are divided into four phases. Thus the four seasons of the year - "the fells' late spring" (Section I), "summer held to its contract" (Section II), the harvest time of "ripe wheat," "reaper" and "stubble" (Section III), and "Winter wrings pigment" (Section V) - are the type for the four periods of the day - the early "morning into noon" (Section I) succeeded by "Riding silk, adrift on noon" (Section II), the evening when "day, dim, laps at the shore" (Section III) and finally "uninterrupted night" (Section V). They are the type, also, for four



aspects of the water cycle - the "Rainwater from the butt" (Section I), the fountain (found in Section II, appropriately enough at this stage of the poem, in its ironic form, "stained as a urinal"), the river with its "bright gravel spawning pools" (Section III) and, finally, the "sea" and "snow" (Section V). The four periods of life also correspond: the youth of "two children" in Section I, the adult nature of the poet's concerns in Section II (and of those of the poet's alter egos, the pilot and Bloodaxe), the sense of aging "now the year ages" in Section IV, and finally death in the Coda, as well as a sense of rebirth, "what's lost, what's left / what horn sunk / what crown adrift."

Another form of cyclical imagery is expressed through images of the divine world, that of death and rebirth, or the disappearance and withdrawal of a god usually associated with the cyclical processes of nature. The structure of 'Briggflatts' bears a clear analogy to this, the young man disappearing from the innocent and paradisaical world of Section I to return, reborn at the end of Section V, and at the winter solstice, when "Then is Now."

The cyclical rhythms of the heavenly bodies are also important. "The daily journey of the sungod across the sky, often thought of guiding a boat" (A.C., p.159) would explain the sudden appearance of ships in Section II (C.P., pp. 55-56): "About ship! Sweat in the south." This is "followed by a mysterious passage through a dark underworld" (A.C., p.159), and hence, I believe, the Cretan maze of the same Section, though in a sense the whole of the life spent in travelling through the fallen world of "toadies, confidence men, kept boys" et al. is a journey through an underworld, and the sun re-emerges positively only when "light lifts from water" in Section V.

That Section II has been said to represent "noon" a mere few paragraphs ago and darkness at this point of the analysis might seem odd.

The sun symbol is, however, employed to represent two aspects of the hero's life, his age and his fortune, the zenith of the one aspect being the nadir of the other, as will often happen when a tragic decision is taken. We observe the same process in the fate of Bloodaxe in the same section. That process is reversed, of course, in the poem's final movement where we find an old man reborn through love.

This latter is a reminder, too, of the way Bunting extends the solar symbolism of the poem by employing the solstitial cycle of the solar year; and the relation of this to our Christmas literature is only one indication of Biblical elements in the work which will be examined in some detail later. In 'Briggflatts' too the newborn light is threatened by the powers of darkness: the "emphatic fire" of starlight is "roaring out to a black flue," and "The starlight you steer by is gone."

The sun's passage is through an underworld "sometimes conceived as the belly of a devouring monster" and here we meet again that monster of sterility that stalks the earlier poetry of Bunting which is, indeed, being referred to in Section II. The poet is seen, unable to unify desire and repugnance,

mating  
beauty with squalor to beget lines still-born.

(C.P., p.55)

Struggling to learn his craft, he is like a mason who

shaping evasive  
                  ornament  
litters his yard  
                  with flawed fragments.

(C.P., p.58)

As Frye points out, the lunar cycle has been on the whole of less importance to Western poetry in historic times, but he indicates the close analogy between the crucial sequence of old moon, "interlunar cave"

and new moon, and the three day rhythm of death, disappearance and resurrection in our Easter symbolism. It is interesting that Bunting's Work in Progress is entitled 'A New Moon'. In this poem's emphasis on the Proserpine myth it would seem that he is attempting to explore the role of the female divine figure in the same way as <sup>he</sup> did the male (a type of Adonis in his association with the vegetative cycle) in 'Briggflatts'.

Frye has not noted the yearly cycle of the stars, but we would expect some significant poetic use of these in a work so strongly rooted in a sense of place. Stars are used, firstly, to unify the opening and close of the poem: images of the sea voyage, the "sea reflecting eyes / and Baltic plainsong speech" of the Viking inheritance in Section I, the "Thole pins shred where the oar leans" of Section II, and, indeed, the strength of the fine imitation of alliterative verse in the same section,

Who sang, sea takes,  
brawn brine, bone grit.  
Keener the kittiwake.  
Fells forget him.  
Fathoms dull the dale ...

such images are brought to a final starlit landfall in the closing section:

Each spark trills on a tone beyond chronological compass  
yet in a sextant's bubble present and firm  
places a surveyer's stone or steadies a tiller.

(C.P., p.70)

The skill with which Bunting draws together the ravelled strands of his theme here - the power of musical tone, the sense of a journey through time in chronological compass, the theme of the artist-craftsman shaping an enduring work, as in stone, and the marvellous voyage - seems to me breathtaking.

Further, the giant Orion who as master of the winter skies strides across them (all the stars mentioned in Section V are part of the great hunting scene of Orion) draws with him a train of significant correspondences to the poet-hero. It is not merely that Orion, the son of Neptune and the nymph Euryale, is connected with the sea: he was so

tall that he could walk through deep water without wetting his head. The movement of Orion through the sky also enacts the disappearance and return of the hero, as, stung by the Scorpion, Orion sinks below the western horizon, then rises on the following night fully restored to strength by Ophiucus, the doctor of antiquity.

Again, the struggle of two goddesses to gain the affection of Orion, of Diana, the goddess of the hunt, and Aurora, the goddess of the dawn, may be thought to correspond to the struggle in Bunting's heart between the influence of Peggy (who is associated with light and with the dawn, as in "we have eaten and loved and the sun is up") and the influence of poetry, Bunting's quest for artistic success. The correspondence seems less contrived when we consider two things: Orion is blind, shot by one of Diana's arrows; and in one version of the story the accident is said to have been caused by Apollo, "Master of singers," who had been displeased because his sister seemed to neglect her hunting duties. The association between blindness and bardic gifts has already been mentioned: the price Odin had to pay for the powers of poet and seer was the sight of his right eye; the price for Bunting was a blindness to the claims of the affections, which had their revenge:

He lies with one to long for another,  
sick, self-maimed, self-hating ...

(C.P., p.55)

Finally, returning to the unifying influence of the stars in 'Briggflatts', if we draw a line upwards through the belt of Orion it will take us to the red star Aldebaran, also mentioned in Section V, the fiery eye of the Bull. Thus the end of the poem, as of the life, is linked with the beginning and the "sweet tenor bull." Such correspondences between myth and life may lie behind the mysterious line, "Starlight is almost flesh" (C.P., p.69).

For Northrop Frye, such correspondences are due to a Spenglerian tendency in most poets, "in the sense that in poetry, as in Spengler, civilised life is frequently assimilated to the organic cycle of growth, maturity, decline, death and rebirth in another individual form" (A.C., p.160). The themes which accompany or embody such a tendency are much to the point in Bunting's case, and, of those Frye mentions, all but one (of a millenium in the future - unless this be the vision of the completed poem itself in the earlier sections) have a place in 'Briggflatts'. Thus we find the themes of a golden or heroic age in the past ("Fierce blood throbs in his tongue / lean words. / Skulls cropped for steel caps ..."); of the wheel of fortune in social affairs ("king of Orkney, king of Dublin, twice / king of York, where the tide / stopped till long flight / ... ended in bale on the fellside"); of the ubi sunt elegy ("young men, tall yesterday, with cabled thighs. / Red deer move less warily since their bows dropped"); of meditations over ruins ("Today's posts are piles to drive into the quaggy past"); of nostalgia for a lost pastoral simplicity ("Shepherds follow the links"); and of regret or exultation over the collapse of an empire ("what's lost, what's left, / what horn sunk, / what crown adrift?").

Other examples could be given, but perhaps enough has been done to suggest in what tradition and through what traditional cosmology Bunting is working.

### The cyclical structure of 'Briggflatts'

Correspondences<sup>even</sup> more striking appear when the structure of the plot of 'Briggflatts' is considered, rather than its symbolism. Frye suggests that there are two fundamental narrative movements, "a cyclical movement within the order of nature, and a dialectical movement from that order into the apocalyptic world above" (A.C., pp. 161-162).

The analogy of innocence is the term Frye gives to the top half of the natural cycle, or the world of romance; the world of "realism", or the analogy of experience, occupies the lower half. From here he posits "four main types of mythical movement: within romance, within experience, down, and up" (A.C., p.162). In Bunting, as in Dante, the upward movement is through a purgatory.

Frye's establishment of four narrative categories of literature (the romantic, the tragic, the comic and the ironic or satiric) is important for a full consideration of Bunting's poetry firstly in that these categories, being broader than the ordinary literary genres, sort well with the poet's own description of his approach to the task of writing by mapping out initially large structural areas of the poem to be later fleshed out in detail. In following Frye we employ a critical "imitative form," so to speak. The four generic plots or mythoi, moreover, will be found to offer a convincing account of the structure of 'Briggflatts'.

In that they form two opposed pairs, tragedy contrasting with comedy, and the ideal world of romance with the actual occurrences of irony, the mythoi also say something of Bunting's creative achievement in his last and finest Sonata. For romance and irony were also contrasted in the twin formative elements on Bunting's style: the romance traditions he encountered and responded to in ancient literatures, and the ironic moment of the modernist revolution in which he found himself manning the barricades. For many years he found it impossible to reconcile the ideal or the sublime with the actual: attempts at "mating / beauty with squalor" (C.P., p.55) ended time and again in "still-born" fragments. Yet the attempts taught the craftsmanship at least, and when the right narrative structures were finally discerned in the events of his own life, Bunting was able to write an autobiography possessing

a significance far beyond the merits or otherwise of his personal conduct and affairs. In it he not only blended, at last, romance and irony successfully to create a definitive statement of his poetic spirit, but he was also able to move beyond the confines of his own career, or voice, by tapping deeper or more resonant sources of meaning, the mythoi. These begin in one man's reading of literature, but end by applying to the lives of all.

It is a question, after all, of one's point of view. In T.S. Dorsch's translation of Horace's words, "A poem is like a painting: the closer you stand to this one the more it will impress you, whereas you have to stand a good distance from that one ..." Though the surface texture of Bunting's verse is finely crafted and attractive, as is readily apparent in the reading, its real greatness is revealed, I believe, by standing back to observe its narrative sweep which, as it moves from Spring to Winter and from youth to age, takes us through the generic plots of comedy, romance, tragedy and irony in its searching examination of the roots of life and the creative impulse.

#### Section I Spring/Comedy

We have identified the opening section of 'Briggflatts' with Spring - with youth, with morning, with rivers and springs. Now the mythos of Spring, in Frye's schema, is comedy, and if his theory is correct we should expect to find significant traces of the generic plot of comedy in this section of the poem. The comic construction, seen most clearly in drama, and descended from Greek New Comedy as handed down by Plautus and Terence, normally displays the desire of a young man for a young woman thwarted by some opposition, usually parental, but finally fulfilled by some twist in the plot near the end of the play. Frye stresses the movement in comedy from a society of which the obstructing characters are in charge to a new society which crystallizes round the

hero.

This does indeed happen in Section I, when the young people evade the claims of an obstructing or dogmatic (Quaker) society centered, it would seem, on death, for "they kiss under rain / bruised by their marble bed," a tombstone. In this case, however, the new society formed at the end of the section is only a temporary one (we shall see later why this should be so): only once, for the purposes of the poem, do "Gentle generous voices weave / over bare night" before "The mason stirs" (C.P., p.53).

Again in Section IV, which takes up and reworks themes and images from earlier sections (as, for example, the "weave" of voices above becomes the "soft / web" and darting shuttles of the spirit in IV) the impermanence of the relationship is stressed:

We have eaten and loved and the sun is up,  
we have only to sing before parting:  
Goodbye, dear love.

(C.P., p.66)

It is only in the final line of the poem that permanence is achieved, in Bunting's version of the line from Catullus which, in the early stages of construction, served as epigraph to the final section, "Nox est una perpetua dormienda," "For love uninterrupted night."

Despite its temporary nature, however, the new society does partake of the traditional festive ritual of comedy, though in humble form:

Sour rye porridge from the hob  
with cream and black tea,  
meat, crust and crumb.

(C.P., p.53)

The scones "greased with fat of fried bacon" in Section IV have the same origin - indeed, they were cooked on the same fire, for the "Knotty wood, hard to rive" of Section I becomes the "Applewood, hard to rive" in Section IV.



The wedding common to comedy is indefinitely postponed here, of course, in the interests of plot and poetic self-assertion, the couple's final meeting taking place in an "unending night," presumably after death, but at any rate, like death in Greek tragedy, off stage.

The obstacles placed before the hero's desire are usually parental: here, the mason is a father-figure in one aspect, the young boy staying at his house, an apprentice of sorts, or spiritual son, whose fingers "ache on the rubbing stone" (as Bunting's did during summer holidays of childhood in the Rawthey valley). The mason has moral law, ritual, precision on his side, he

lays his rule  
at a letter's edge,  
fingertips checking

(C.P., p.51).

It is the tendency of comedy to reconcile or convert rather than finally to repudiate the blocking characters, and this is achieved in 'Briggflatts' by having the figure of the mason possess attributes of value to the poet-hero - not only the "Baltic plainsong speech," the "lean words" Bunting loves to use, but the accuracy and precision of the craftsman:

Words!  
Pens are too light.  
Take a chisel to write.

(C.P., p.53)

(This idea, considered in negative, leads to the "flawed fragments" of Section II).

The emphasis on reconciliation rather than on the blocking character himself (the trend of comic irony or satire) places the comic elements here with romantic comedy, though not necessarily with Shakesperian comedy. Unlike, however, the often undeveloped figure of the romantic comic hero whose real life begins only once the action has ceased, by

the implication of its ending "happily ever after," the real life of the poet-hero begins immediately, he thinks, through his denial of the claims of the new society he has created:

Take no notice of tears;  
 letter the stone to stand  
 over love laid aside lest  
 insufferable happiness impede  
 flight to Stainmore  
 to trace  
 lark, mallet,  
 becks, flocks  
 and axe knocks.

(C.P., p.54)

The search for a life of action (poetic action, in the attention to the sound-values displayed in the last lines here) is admittedly a flight from reality. Its detrimental effects are made apparent in the connotations of the destination chosen: life on this battlefield will stain more deeply than the young man supposed.

The flight does bring us, however, to a central thematic relationship in Bunting's poetry, that between art and life. Frye suggests that "the movement from pistis to gnosis, from a society controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and older characters to a society controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom is fundamentally, as the Greek words suggest, a movement from illusion to reality" (A.C., p.169). Responsive to cyclical mechanisms, the young poet's fancy turns from the reality offered by love to the challenge set by the new reality of art (it had been Bunting's earliest ambition to be a poet). The new reality proves at first to be an illusion:

Brief words are hard to find,  
 shapes to carve and discard.

. . . . .

Name and date  
 split in soft slate

(C.P., p.54).

At this point, the young poet does not possess the craftsmanship, the

maturity or strength of the master mason: his material and forms are amorphous, brittle, "soft slate". Yet the illusion of perfection haunts and drives the hero until the reality of the poem is finally achieved, its 750 words hewn from over 20,000, and finding the form we are at present exploring, the form as it were already embedded in the material itself, and incorporating the initial theme of love in enduring form. The reality of art, at once false and true, is thus celebrated throughout from youth to age:

In such soft air  
they trudge and sing,  
laying the tune frankly on the air.

(Section I)

Flexible, unrepétitive line  
to sing, not paint; sing, sing,  
laying the tune on the air ...

(Section II)

sing,  
strewing the notes on the air  
as ripples skip in a shallow.

(Section V)

In the thematic recurrence and development of these lines can be observed, in little, the progress of Bunting's art from the early frank and unconscious acceptance of experience prior to poetry, through the later conscious differentiation of his own poetic emphasis on sound rather than on image - "to sing, not paint" - to the final late unity of sound and image where sibilant and rippling liquid -r and -l sounds combine to enact the chosen experience in its entirety.

The comic elements of Section I, then, dissolve themselves immediately into something else, but we may still assign them to their place in that "somewhat forbidding piece of symmetry" (ipse dixit) by which Frye recognises six phases of each mythos, the first three phases of comedy being parallel to the first three phases of irony and satire, and the second three to the second three of romance. And here, in

Gerard Manley Hopkins's words, "the faithful waver, the faithless fable and miss." But let us see what can be done.

The destruction of the comic society brings the hero down to a flawed and demonic world of rootless wandering in Section II, and the close proximity of that demonic world might lead us to suppose that ironic comedy may have shaped the structure of Section I. It is not the first or most ironic phase of comedy, in which a humorous society triumphs or remains undefeated, that concerns us here, since love has defeated that society before it is itself destroyed by one of the lovers. Rather it is the second, or quixotic, phase of comedy, "a comedy in which the hero does not transform a humorous society but simply escapes or runs away from it, leaving its structure as it was before" (A.C., p.180). 'Briggflatts' presents the more complex irony in this phase whereby "a society is constructed by or around a hero, but proves not sufficiently real or strong to impose itself. In this situation the hero is usually himself at least partly a comic humour or mental runaway," and we have seen how such "obsessive" qualities of the mason as accuracy and precision are internalised in the hero. Often, too, we find "either a hero's illusion thwarted by a superior reality or a clash of two illusions," the latter being the case in 'Briggflatts', where the hero, by seeking after an artistic ideal which is, at this stage, an illusion for him, renders his love an illusion too. It is only in the final section of the poem that both illusions fuse to one reality.

Quixotic comedy exhibits the redeemed society "in adolescence, still too ignorant of the ways of the world to impose itself" (A.C., p. 185). The end of the poem presents a happy ending long delayed, and appropriately contains vestigial elements of a later phase of comedy, the fifth phase which presents a world corresponding to Shakespeare's late "romances," where the mood is less festive than pensive, the aged

poet speaks with the authority of a Prospero, and where tragedy is less avoided than contained - in this case by the final acceptance of love's power to endure: "She has been with me fifty years."

In this phase the redeemed society is seen to be "part of a settled order which has been there from the beginning" (A.C., p.185), the Northumbria where "Then is Now," an order "which takes on an increasingly religious cast, and seems to be drawing away from human experience altogether." Bunting's "furthest, fairest things, stars" are what an atheist poet in an ironic age can do to reflect at this point the vision of the Paradiso which "moves out of our circle of mythoi into the apocalyptic or abstract mythical world above it" (A.C., p.185).

Since the poem is in a sense circular, the journey beginning anew in the Coda, elements of the sixth and final phase, reflecting the collapse and disintegration of the comic society, are also to be found here. Thus we encounter the social units of comedy becoming "small and esoteric, or even confined to a single individual," as the poet, alone on the shore, admits that "The star you steer by is gone." There is also an emphasis on "secret and sheltered places" or "secluded valleys" (the Dales); "the penseroso mood of romance ... the sense of individual detachment from routine existence" ("free of our humbug"); and an "oracular solemnity" (A.C., p.185) which issues in the solemn music of Section V.

The comic society has thus grown from adolescence to death, and although there is perhaps a suggestion of a psychological "return to the womb" in the emphasis on native place, the main drift of the poem is active and outwards on the night tide:

Night, float us.  
Offshore wind, shout ...

(C.P., p.71).

## Section II Summer/Romance

Some romance elements in 'Briggflatts' have already been noted, external or incidental ideas, often, rather than formal forces. With an examination of romance as the mythos of summer we come closer to the shaping spirit of the diversity of imagery not only in Section II of the poem but also in the poem as a whole and Collected Poems read as a whole. Some ability to shift perspective is demanded of the reader who would journey round these three concentric rings of romance in Bunting's poetry.

Romance presents to every age the idealised virtues of the ruling social or intellectual elite and the vices which threaten them. After Arnold, a poet is a likely enough choice of hero, belief in poetry having replaced belief in the efficacy of the Bible not merely in Bunting's case. In an ironic age it is also fitting that the poet should present, as he does in 'Briggflatts', a not wholly admirable profile.

Two elements of romance stand out clearly. The first, in the poem as a whole, is a nostalgia, persistent in all forms of romance, whereby Northumbria and the austere values of the north, and the redemptive and enduring subtleties of art, reflect an imaginative golden age in space and time respectively. The second is the procession of adventures, both nautical and amorous, in Section II, "leading up to a major or climacteric adventure, usually announced from the beginning, the completion of which rounds off the story" (A.C., p.187).

Thus the quest in Section II begins with an acceptance of a "mission imposed" - the poetic exploration of all areas of existence:

Secret, solitary, a spy, he gauges  
 lines of a Flemish horse  
 hauling beer, the angle, obtuse,  
 a slut's blouse draws on her chest,  
 . . . . . decodes  
 thunder, scans  
 porridge bubbling, pipes clanking, feels  
 Buddha's basalt cheek. . . . .  
 (C.P., p.55)

It ends in the Cretan labyrinth (C.P., p.60) with the unflinching acceptance of the darkest aspects of the Self - this is our goal - which that potent symbol suggests.

Such acceptance is ultimately connected with the fulfilment of the poet's creative role: immediately prior to the Pasiphae adventure Bunting answers the complaint of the artist in an apparently sterile world:

But who will entune a bogged orchard,  
its blossom gone,  
fruit unformed, where hunger and  
damp hush the hive?

(C.P., p.59)

by proffering an acceptance of this world and the discovery of beauty and music within it, in the "insolent" roe, in the vixen, scared and cringing, yet "red against privet stems as a mazurka," and in the rat which

grey, rummaging  
behind the compost heap has daring  
to thread, lithe and alert, Schoenberg's maze

(and which in Section IV becomes an aspect of the poet's personality, "evasive to persist, / reject the bait / yet gnaw the best")

Only by such acceptance "is summer held to its contract / and the year solvent" (C.P., p.60) and "the fifty years at risk" staked at the start of the section redeemed. As in Section V, however, any triumph is necessarily impermanent for men driven by the storms of life, and the movement at the end of Section II is onward, ever deeper into the labyrinth.

Nevertheless, Section V may be regarded as the completion of a quest presented in the poem as a whole, of Bunting's life-long search for a work which would stand beside that of great artists of the past, in particular musicians, Scarlatti, Monteverdi:

The sheets are gathered and bound,  
the volume indexed and shelved

(C.P., p.70).

That the work is seen as "an empty combe," silent but for the buzzing of (critical) bees, that is, retaining a natural or organic form, is the logical end of a faithful attempt to "entune" nature by creating a "descant" to it, an aim which is suggested in the opening lines. Some Orphic implications of this method will be mentioned later; at any rate, it enables Bunting to stand with his own singing robes about him beside those who have woven of art and life a seamless garment of sound:

swift desert ass startled by the  
camels' dogged saunter  
figures sudden flight of the descant  
on a madrigal by Monteverdi

(C.P., p.59).

#### The quest myth and its meaning in Bunting's poetry

Frye postulates three main stages of the successful quest: the perilous journey (the agon or conflict); the crucial struggle between the hero and his enemy (the pathos or death struggle); and the exaltation of the hero (his anagnorisis) even if he does not survive the conflict.

In Section II the poet on his perilous journey survives the dangers of the metropolis ("shopped and jailed, cleaned out by whores"), of the sea in the north ("who sang, sea takes"), and of the land in the south ("Days jerk, dawdle, fidget / towards the cesspit"). Love is suspect, from "the half-pint / left breast of a girl who bared it in Kleinfeldt's" (a London literary pub patronised by Bunting in the twenties) to the siren attentions of Antoinietta's "submarine Amalfitan kisses."

The death struggle is enacted by a surrogate, in the first instance: Bloodaxe, like the poet, is a traitor "loaded with mail of linked lies" who also fled to Stainmore. Viewing the poem as a whole, however, one



would place the point of ritual death rather in Section III, in the transition between Alexander's vision of death on the mountain-top (he is another type of the poet-hero) and the recovery, the "rebate" which follows. Bloodaxe lacks the vision both of the poet and of Alexander, if not their ambitious drive, but there is no doubt that in each section death modulates immediately into discovery, or anagnorisis, the recognition of the artist's power and his identity with the natural world: thus

Starfish, poinsettia on a half-tide crag,  
a galliard by Byrd.

(C.P., p.59)

and

Ripe wheat is my lodging....

. . . . .

Its swaying  
copies my gait.

(C.P., p.63)

It is at once the advantage and the justification of the critical use of mythoi that they explain such sudden shifts of emphasis or tone in 'Briggflatts'. The poet, of course, employs them confidently and, almost, instinctively. It seems hardly necessary to add that the accumulation of accurate detail and the kind of verbal enactment examined elsewhere ensure that the bare bones of myth which are picked over here become a living reality in the reading of the poem:

Thole pins shred where the oar leans,  
grommets renewed, tallowed;  
halliards frapped to the shrouds.  
Crew grunt and gasp.

(C.P., p.56)

That the search for such "lean words" extended through Bunting's whole creative life and is present as a theme in Sonatas and Odes, means that the quest structure applies not only to Section II but also to the

"autobiography" as a whole and, in a sense later to be examined, to the Collected Poems.

The conflict in Bunting's artistic quest involves a hero who carries certain attributes of divinity (he is a Messiah or deliverer) and an enemy "analogous to the demonic powers of a lower world" (A.C., p.187). This poet, like his more ancient brother Mariner, delivers us from the bondage of a stale and sterile world view unredeemed by any sense of wonder at the beauty in variety of life. In the same moment, he gives point to his own wanderings. The enemy he must fight is, in this psychomachy, an attitude of mind which is negative and self-destructive, and is felt most keenly by the poet as the demon of artistic sterility, the "flawed fragments," the work which "looks well on the page, but never / well enough" (C.P., p.57). Only when he has overcome this demon is he able, Orpheus-like, to "entune" the lower world,

and stars and lakes  
echo him and the copse drums out his measure.

(C.P., p.66)

Opposite cycles of nature are marshalled on the opposing sides in this conflict. The sterile enemy is associated with winter, hence the "Rime / on the bent, the beck ice" at the death of Bloodaxe (C.P., p.58) echoing "Rime is crisp on the bent" (C.P., p.66) at the death of love, the literary connotations of the field of battle in both cases lurking within the word "bent" from the Anglo-Saxon beonet. The enemy, inimical to all aspects of living, brings the confused, sterile, moribund life we encounter in the moment of defeat in the third and fourth stanzas of C.P., p.59 - the "vultures," "desert," "bogged orchard," "fruit unformed," "hunger and / damp" and "codling moth." The hero is associated with the Spring (we note, viewing the poem as a whole, his awakening "by a spring" - C.P., p.63), and with order, here of dancing, of music, in "a galliard by Byrd," "a madrigal by Monteverdi,"

"a mazurka" (C.P., p.59). The liveliness, the sudden alternations of stance, tone and rhythm which is Bunting's choice in poetry is apparent in the hero's choice of dance music (I remember him marvelling at the boldness of Corelli, as the only composer who thought that the music appropriate for the taking of communion was a jig). The hero is also associated with fertility and with vigour in the "Ripe wheat," "plowtime" and "seed", and the "twirling," "swirling," "swaggering" and "prance" of C.P., pp. 63-64.

It could be argued, then, that the conflict takes up the central conflict of romance which is, Frye suggests, the dragon killing theme of the Perseus and St. George stories. The ritual analogies of this myth, he finds, suggest that the monster who lays waste the kingdom is the sterility of the land itself and that the same sterility is present in the age and impotence of the king whose daughter the hero rescues from the dragon. The king is sometimes suffering from an incurable wound or malady.

Three points of interest suggest themselves here. Firstly, Bunting handles this theme at once more realistically and in a more successfully artistic fashion than Eliot does in 'The Waste Land' by fusing it within the context of his own life. Secondly, the "self-maimed" poet, castrated symbolically if not anatomically, is both aged king and young hero in this conflict (the dragon lies within him too), a starring role made possible only by the poet's obstetric power to bring forth the world in which both he and his readers move. Thirdly, this flawed poet is the last of a line which begins with "Attis grieving for his testicles" and continues with the "gelding" poet of 'The Well of Lycopolis', sad products of the period of life which is the setting in time of Section II of 'Briggflatts'.

The Bible, as we have seen, was a central influence on Bunting's metric, as it is on Frye's formulation of romance. It would be surprising, given his detailed knowledge of it, if it had not influenced the images of the quest in 'Briggflatts'.

In Section II of the poem, some of the power of the sea imagery seems to derive from the traditional religious association of the sea with sterility and the fallen world. The leviathan, both a sea monster and associated with the sterile society of Egypt and Babylon, sorts well with the city and sea imagery of this section (C.P., pp. 55-56). Described in the Book of Job as "king over all the children of pride," this monster, or rather his monstrous modern analogues, is a direct result of the poet's pride in laying love aside in Section I, and he falls, a latter-day Adam or Job, into a blasted and poverty-stricken world, a "cesspit" (C.P., p.56).

In Christian symbolism, Christ the hero overcomes the dragon, Satan, identified in Revelation with leviathan and the Edenic serpent, the latter identification bringing into focus the "slowworm" image (he is his own worst enemy, a nice judgment of guilt and acceptance since this image carries pagan connotations of fertility too) as well as the poet's responsibility for the fall from the northern Eden of Sections I and IV and its innocent and unashamed sexuality. The old king is Adam, and Christ becomes his son, a second Adam (as the mason's wayward apprentice is replaced by a better craftsman, also a builder in a permanent medium) and the rescued bride the Church gives rise to the imagery from the Song of Solomon in Section IV. At the moment of discovery or redemption in Section III the hero finally sloughs his self-destructive guilt and the slowworm is consciously differentiated from the snake: "I am neither snake nor lizard ..." (C.P., p.63). The hero's recovery is compared to recovery from "an adder's sting," and the landscape he moves

through described in religious terms: "I polish my side / on pillars of its transept." Thus we see Bunting adapting the Biblical imagery learned by heart in his Quaker childhood in such a way as to lose nothing of its symbolic power while rendering it acceptable in a secular age.

While Northrop Frye with his customary panache plays ducks and drakes with the image of the leviathan, the reader cannot fail to notice how the ripples move outwards to touch upon the boundaries of Bunting's poetry, the shaping forces that give the poem its power. From the iconographic depiction of the inhabitants of the fallen world as existing within the belly of the leviathan, and secular versions of journeys inside monsters to "The image of the dark winding labyrinth for the monster's belly" (A.C., p.190) is a small step for Frye. It is more helpful for the reader in this context to step back from the surface complexities of 'Briggflatts' and see, in the poem as a whole, the hero emerging from a dark cavern with a young girl, or the image of one, in his arms. The role is shared with Theseus, Tom Sawyer and Jesus Christ, but Bunting's poet-hero "is no grotesque in such company" (C.P., p.59).

The poem, to be sure, ends with a re-entry into the dark, for reasons to be examined in some detail later. And Section II comes to a close in the labyrinth Theseus was to use. Apart from its function as an image of the unconscious world, the "meaning" earlier assigned to it, what is the force of the mythical labyrinth at this point in the poem, and what is the relationship of this place and incident to the autobiographical elements in the poem?

In Greek legend the "god-bull" of the poem was a gift from Poseidon to Minos, King of Crete. Through intercourse with the bull, Pasiphae, the wife of Minos, created the Minotaur, the monster which Minos kept

in his labyrinth and which fed on the flesh of Athenian youths and maidens until slain by Theseus.

As a gift from Poseidon, the bull emerged from the dark, formless, unconscious world of the sea. The woman accepted the mating, indeed "gloried in unlike creation," and created a monster from it. In the evocation of the destructive drives of the human unconscious which the Minotaur may perhaps symbolise,<sup>8</sup> created by an earth-mother figure, Bunting seems to intertwine good and evil, earth and sea, yoking brute nature with human spirit, "byre stink" with glory. The poet's acceptance of this primal world may be all that is intended, as he emerges from the cavern with the image made.

Yet there is also a biographical relevance. As Pasiphaë mated with the bull, so Peggy mated with Basil, also a "sweet tenor." From this union a monster was created, a destructive and sterile impulse to "amputate" or "murder" the connection (giving rise to the wasteland motif of sterility and ineffectuality already noted in Bunting's poetry). Yet both women are connected with builders, skilful men, fertile of invention, daedalian. And modern art, too, constitutes a "maze" whether constructed by Schoenberg or Bunting. The rat in Section II which "has daring / to thread, lithe and alert, Schoenberg's maze" is a type of the poet-hero, a connection explicitly developed at the end of Section IV.

Thus the Pasiphaë incident would seem to resolve into an examination of the dark foundations of art, of its emanation from the unconscious, of the artist's role, once "appointed," as an explorer of that maze, a role often involving a "dérangement de tous les sens" apparently destructive of ordinary human feeling or "decent" behaviour.

The romance of Section II, then, ends in a tentative anagnorisis or recognition of the hero, at one with and "entuning" the nature he

portrays. As to entuning, we note, for example, at this point of the poem the verbal enactment of the movements of creatures and of music - now startled, now sauntering or soaring - achieved through accurate placing of stressed and unstressed syllables:

or swift desert ass startled by the  
camels' dogged saunter  
figures sudden flight of the descant  
on a madrigal by Monteverdi.

(C.P., p.59)

The recognition is mitigated by the monstrosity created by the quest for artistic perfection, but positive in the element of power arising from the acceptance by the woman (and, by implication, by artists who "fret" for perfection) of the role assigned by fate:

nor did flesh flinch  
distended by the brute  
nor loaded spirit sink  
till it had gloried in unlike creation.

(C.P., p.60)

It was Bunting's fate to wander and to write, "driven by storms" both economic and psychological. As we regard his life, and read those letters which survive from the nineteen forties and fifties or his reminiscences in Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal, we can recognise a growing sense of assurance which derives from his diverse experience of life and is reflected in his poems. If he is wandering in a desert he learns to survive there, finding kindred spirits in savage tribesmen: "So are the pleasant journeys ended, amongst mountain tribes, long trips on horseback, moufflon hunts ... The Bakhtiari sent a note to the British Government asking for my return to Persia." <sup>9</sup> Like Arpachshad, the wandering Arab of 'The Spoils', he finds "rags no dishonour" so long as he can respond to "poems, beating with a leaping measure / like blood in a new wound." Unlike Asshur, the merchant, Bunting has "tasted bread / where there is ice in his flask" among the mountains of northern Persia, as a letter to Zukofsky points out. Bunting the soldier learned

to give and take life, and to accept that "the spoils are for God" when in wartime the part of the world where he happens to be is "as good a grave as any, earth or water." The Quaker belief which caused him to endure imprisonment as a conscientious objector during and after the First World War has gone, and we find him almost absurdly eager to find his place in the action of the Second:

First of all I couldn't get into any of the service units. I finally wangled my way into the Royal Air Force by coming across a doctor on one of the boards who had known my father, was friendly, and allowed me to get the letters on the eye chart by heart before I had to read them out.... But the very first day I was there a notice appeared asking for volunteers for what was described as difficult and dangerous work at sea. And I thought, well, that's the job for me. 10

His experience of the sea proved to be his point of entry to the action, and we are reminded of his growing control of that element in the exultant acceptance of risk in the final lines of 'The Spoils':

who'd rather  
make fast Fortune with a slippery hitch?  
Tide sang. Guns sang ...

(C.P., p.47).

How far this is in tone from the youthful inexperience and impatience of Ode I of 1924:

Weary on the sea  
for sight of land  
gazing past the coming wave we  
see the same wave.

(C.P., p.87)

Between the two lies the range of tones that time on the sea had taught - the sandboats at Rapallo, private yachts in the United States, the Devon fishing fleet, balloon ships on the North Sea - a range which includes the celebration of the waves' "exuberance of unexplained desire" (in Ode 3, "To Peggy Mullet"); the bitterness of exile in "The Complaint of the Morpethshire Farmer": "My sons'll see the land I'm leaving / as barren as her deck"; the satire of Ode 24; the voice of the experienced



fisherman in Ode 22:

Mesh cast for mackerel  
by guess and the sheen's tremor,  
imperceptible if you havent the knack -  
a difficult job.

(C.P., p.109)

Such experience lies behind the pilot's control in Section II of  
'Briggflatts':

Unscarred ocean,  
day's swerve, swell's poise, pursuit,  
he blends, balances, drawing leagues under the keel  
to raise cold cliffs where tides  
knot fringes of weed.

(C.P., p.56)

Further behind, yet still, I think, just discernible on the horizon of literary effect, we may make out the influence of "the two concentric quest-myths in the Bible, a Genesis-apocalypse myth and an Exodus-millennium myth" (A.C., p.191). Like Adam, through his own fault cast out of Eden, the poet lost the river of life ("Rawthey truculent, dingy" - C.P., p.54) and wandered in the labyrinth of human history - hence the diversity of cultural reference and allusion in his poetry, perhaps - until restored to his original state by becoming his own Messiah. Or like Moses and the Israelites he wandered through desert lands, with increasing certainty of direction, until restored to his austere Promised Land of Northumberland with its gritty coastline facing "Cold northern clear sea-gardens."

This large comparison seems rather less contrived if we remember, firstly, the overall movement of the Sonatas from bondage in 'Villon', through the confused, painful and sterile world of 'Attis', 'The Well of Lycopolis' and 'Aus dem Zweiten Reich', and the desert of 'The Spoils' (a landscape which though war-torn leads to a final acceptance of destiny or the will of God) to the achieved perfection of 'Briggflatts'.

In the second place, it is interesting to remember the

identification already made between Bunting's protagonist and Christ in their redemptive role, and to note the aspects of sea-symbolism which they share. Not only does this help explain the present nature, in this poem of recollection, of a sacred book once learned by heart, but also why the imagery of fishing, for example, occurs more strikingly in Section V of the poem than elsewhere, a question of some importance if the claim of "achieved perfection" is to have any substance.

In the Bible there is a typological identification between Christ and Joshua, his namesake, who brought the tribes of Israel to the Promised Land. Christ's defeat of Satan in the desert raised Eden in the wilderness. In Bunting's poetry, similarly, we find a vision of a new and vital way of life seized out of near defeat in the desert in the final section of 'The Spoils', and a revelation of the strength of that new life in the earlier description of the Islamic world view with its enduring sense of beauty and pride:

On a terrace over a pool  
vafur, vodka, tea,  
resonant verse spilled  
from Onsori, Sa'di,  
till the girls' mutter is lost  
in whisper of stream and leaf ...

They despise police work,  
are not masters of filing;  
always a task for foreigners  
to make them unhappy,  
unproductive and rich.

(C.P., p.43)

The similarity between Bunting's persona and Christ is apparent in the aspects of sea symbolism which they share. If we return to the leviathan, which is, indeed, not to be by-passed until, as Ezekial tells us (29:4), he is hooked and landed by the Lord, or, as Northrop Frye tells us, until Revelation's prophecy (21:1) comes to pass, that there is no more sea (that is to say, leviathan and the sea are identified), we can grasp the significance of the fishing imagery of Section V, as

well as its implications elsewhere in Collected Poems.

If the leviathan is the sea, then the inhabitants of the fallen world are underwater, as the denizens of Section IV of 'The Well of Lycopolis' are:

and besides I want you to know for certain  
that there are people under the water. They are sighing.

(C.P., p.35)

The hero in the fallen world of Section II of 'Briggflatts', similarly, enjoys "submarine Amalfitan kisses."

Both Christ and Bunting's hero, however, are seen to control the sea: Bunting, like the pilot of Section II, blends and balances diverse elements to reach his destination, even though, as he admits, "the star you steer by is gone." If Christ's apostles are fishers of men, Bunting lets his own nets down into the depths of a cultured mind and brings up a poem shaped not merely out of chance phrase and remembered incident but by the example and the method, the archetypal structures, of a lifetime's reading of literature. As a writer's area of command is writing, it is not surprising to find that the sea and fishing are used by Bunting as symbols of his task, the completion of a great work. The impotent "fisher-king" of 'Attis' who "went and sat among the rank watergrasses by the Tyne" (C.P., p.20) is replaced by the successful angler of 'Briggflatts': "No angler homes with empty creel though mist dims day" (C.P., p.65). And since he is successful (i.e. the poem is nearing completion) he is able to turn away from fishing for perfection to simply "sing":

Conger skimped at the ebb, lobster,  
neither will I take, nor troll  
roe of its like for salmon.

. . . . .  
Sing,  
strewing the notes on the air  
as ripples skip in a shallow.

(C.P., p.68)

This easy confidence is far removed from the poet's early struggle against the seas of rhetoric, "stubborn against the trades" in 'The Well of Lycopolis'.

### Double structuring of the quest in 'Briggflatts'

Such use of the sea in Section V of 'Briggflatts' is learned as much from literature as from experience. It has already been remarked that this section is similar in tone and image to Shakespeare's late romances. As Prospero rescues a society from the sea, so in 'The Spoils' something of significance is fished out of the sea: not merely the "drowned Chinese" but a confidence, painfully absent in Bunting's Sonatas of the thirties, of vision and of tone. In 'Briggflatts' what emerges from the sea is the heroine, as delicately beautiful and enduring as starlight which appears constant to the eye (the aged pilot-poet is not blind to the facts of experience) even when the light's distant origin has ceased to exist and "the star you steer by is gone" (C.P., p.70). As if to bring our focus back to experience, Bunting characteristically aligns himself with real fishermen, their use of stars and their ways of speech: "Sailors pronounce Betelgeuse 'Beetle juice' and so do I" (Notes to C.P., p.157).

We have already noted how the stars of Section V play out in their movements the symbolism found in all myths of dying gods, as Orion sinks below the horizon and is restored by Ophi<sup>u</sup>scus. "If the leviathan is death, and the hero has to enter the body of death, the hero has to die, and if his quest is completed the final stage of it is, cyclically, rebirth" (A.C., p.192). In the Coda the life-giving rainwaters of Spring are released from their prison within the sea in "rain slant, spray flick."

Thus Northrop Frye comes to distinguish four rather than three aspects of the quest myth: "First, the agon or conflict itself. Second,

the pathos or death, often the mutual death of hero and monster. Third, the disappearance of the hero, a theme which often takes the form of sparagmos or tearing to pieces. Sometimes the hero's body is distributed around the natural world, as in the stories of Orpheus and more especially Osiris. Fourth, the reappearance or recognition of the hero, "where sacramental Christianity follows the metaphorical logic: those who in the fallen world have partaken of their redeemer's divided body are united with his risen body" (A.C., p.192).

Looking at Section II as a romance structure we can see how it corresponds to these aspects of the quest. First, from the opening lines to "litters his yard/with flawed fragments" (C.P., p.58) there is a conflict between creativity and sterility in the hero's life. Second, the death of the hero, in his identity with Bloodaxe, takes up the next eight lines to "severs tight / neck cords." The sparagmos follows in "Spine / Picked bare by ravens, agile, / maggots devour the slack side ..." and indeed the hero does disappear as animals and musicians take the stage, as if the spirit of music were distributed round the natural world: "Starfish, poinsettia on a half-tide crag / a galliard by Byrd ..." Fourth comes his reappearance and recognition in a poetry made out of privation and his own backyard:

and rat, grey, rummaging  
behind the compost heap has daring  
to thread, lithe and alert, Schoenberg's maze.

The rhythm of the section rises to the final, though somewhat equivocal, "glory" of the closing lines:

nor loaded spirit sink  
till it had gloried in unlike creation.

(C.P., p.60)

It is also possible, I have suggested, to view the whole of 'Briggflatts' as a quest: in this case, the divisions or aspects of the myth are found in the following way. The agon or conflict begins

in the final three stanzas of Section I - "No hope of going back. / Hounds falter and stray, / shame deflects the pen" (C.P., p.54) - and continues through the fallen world of Section II, and up the mountain in Section III, "file sharp, skinning his fingers" (C.P., p.62). At this point occurs the pathos or death of the hero, in the vision of Israfel and the Last Judgment: "When will the signal come / to summon man to his clay?" (C.P., p.63). Here the hero seems to die, and certainly his illusion of power or perfection does forever, but he himself is immediately resurrected, although now living close to the earth, all but absorbed into his landscape, as painful guilt modulates into acceptance and self-forgiveness, the serpent becomes the slowworm and the poet finds his own "breath" or voice at last:

So he  
ascertained moss and bracken,  
a cold squirm snaking his flank  
and breath leaked to his ear:  
I am neither snake no lizard,  
I am the slowworm.

(C.P., p.63)

In one sense this may be taken to be a form of sparagmos, in which the hero's body, like that of Orpheus, is distributed through the natural world: "my quilt a litter of husks, I prosper / lying low, little concerned." (There is also, of course, the biographical reference to Bunting's position far from the mainstream of cultural life on his return to Britain in the nineteen fifties.) If this is so, then the deliberately dark and confusing world of Section IV ("Follow the clue patiently and you will understand nothing") is explicable as taking its tone, imagery and unusual form, strikingly diverse and contradictory even within a poem of contrasts, from the literature of irony and satire which Frye links with this stage of the quest: "Sparagmos, or the sense that heroism and effective action are absent, disorganized or foredoomed to defeat, and that confusion and anarchy reign over the world,



bar escape ..." In keeping with the prevailing tone of disorganisation and defeat, however, the section ends in loneliness, age and dejection:

Stars disperse. We too  
further from neighbours  
now the year ages.

(C.P., p.67)

Only in Section V do the stars come into an alignment which gives final point and fixed value to the hero's wandering. Here occurs the anagnorisis or reappearance of the hero, the "recognition of a newborn society rising in triumph around a still somewhat mysterious hero and his bride" (A.C., p.192). And since the poem is constructed on cyclical lines the society of "Redesdale and Coquetdale ... Wilson and Telfer" (C.P., p.69) takes us back to the child bride of Garsdale and Rawthey in Section I. We have already examined that section in terms of comedy, the archetypal theme of which is anagnorisis in Frye's terminology.

Frye comes to see the four mythoi of comedy, romance, tragedy and irony as "four aspects of a central unifying myth" (A.C., p.192) and it is this central quest myth that, to my mind, lies behind the (romance) form of 'Briggflatts', giving it a strength and unity that seemed on its publication so striking to those with knowledge of his earlier work. Cyril Connolly wrote, "I was quite unprepared for 'Briggflatts' which seems to me one of the best poems I have read and re-read for a long time.... In Bunting there is a lyrical note which he has been steadily compressing and which makes 'Briggflatts' almost all lyric or rather intensely musical."<sup>11</sup> This effect on the reader, the impression of an encounter with something substantial, here attributed to the strength of a lyricism highly compressed, I would attribute, in part at least, to the underlying structure. The words may, as Connolly later says, "shine like hoarfrost," but frost does not often hang in empty air, it adheres to solid ground.



The myth is unifying also in the sense that it draws into its pattern the earlier works which existed so uneasily in Poems 1950, precariously standing, as Bunting did, between artistic significance (his gifts were obvious) and nullity - the shame of being a footnote to great literature being no doubt much in the mind of one who had been seen in the company of Pound, Eliot and Joyce, or, for that matter, who saw himself in the company of Aneurin and Taliesin, Horace, Wyatt, Wordsworth, Malherbe, Firdosi et al.

Viewing the Sonatas as a whole (the minor pieces, in the words of Wordsworth's Preface to the 1814 edition of The Excursion, "will be found by the attentive Reader to have such connection with the main Work as may give them claim to be likened to the little cells, oratories and sepulchral recesses, ordinarily included in [a gothic church]") the basic quest is Bunting's search for a poem that might live. This was the treasure hidden from him for so long: treasure "means wealth, which in mythopoeic romance often means wealth in its ideal forms, power and wisdom" (A.C., p.193). The quest is not undertaken without cost: the lower world, as Frye notes, "the world inside or behind the guarding dragon, is often inhabited by a prophetic sybil, and is a place of oracles and secrets, such as Woden was willing to mutilate himself to obtain. Mutilation or physical handicap, which combines the themes of sparagmos and ritual death, is often the price of unusual wisdom or power, as it is in the figure of the crippled smith Weyland or Hephaistos.." (A.C., p.193). Hence we find the riddling prophecy of Cybele to the self-maimed poet Attis on the nature and potential of poetry, on the mode of reality of a work of art:

The peacock's knavery  
keeps you in slavery.  
The roses cheat  
you, butcher's meat.  
The myrtles' pretence  
offends commonsense.

Yet a muse defrauds  
the Mother of Gods.  
Ponder this allegorical  
oracle.

(C.P., p.24)

Hence also Bunting's use of the smith's forge as a metaphor in Ode 16 and in Section II of 'Briggflatts' (C.P., p.58) for the (unsuccessful) deployment of poetic gifts.

But 'Briggflatts' could not claim much beyond polite critical interest were it not based on something larger than a personal story of artistic success after long failure. What, then, do we find there?

In the poem, and in the new perspective which it brings to Collected Poems, we encounter the archetypal human life in literary space and time, as it descends from innocence to experience, from an Eden to the world of nature, and journeys through that world on a quest for the new paradise which the knowledge gained in experience makes desirable.<sup>12</sup> Thus the poem's relation to human life is a profound one, achieving in its cyclical structure a power to affect the reader more deeply than the earlier poems, read in isolation from it, which deal only with the world of experience. (This would even hold true, I believe, when the reader, like the listener to music, is not consciously aware of the forms operating upon him). The explanation of the fall and the ascent which 'Briggflatts' offers puts the earlier works in a new light, however, and raises them in turn to a form more fitted to Bunting's ambitions: without 'Briggflatts' he was a skilful explorer only of the limits repugnance, the nadir of man's literary universe; with 'Briggflatts' and "Second Book of Odes" he reaches for the opposite pole of the limits of desire, a literary heaven, or at least, as Section V of the poem reveals, a place among the stars.

At the same time, he contrives to explore the dominant themes of literature: these, "whether romantic, tragic, satiric and ironic, or

comic, are associated roughly with, respectively, the world of innocence, the fall from innocence to experience, the world of experience, and the ascent from experience to a higher imaginative world." <sup>13</sup>

This is, as the writer admits, a rough analogy: some differences of emphasis are necessary and obvious in the present discussion, in the association of romance with the fallen world in Section II of 'Briggflatts', for example, (although the dream of the completed poem and the memory of innocence are also present there). But basically the structure holds, and it is a strong one.

It holds, too, interesting implications for Bunting's unfashionable view of the poet's function: "Poetry is seeking to make not meaning, but beauty..." and for the validity of his poetic method of working through contrary themes and tones. "The fact that the literary capture of desire involves a descent near the limits of repugnance is one of the reasons that, as Coleridge observed, the disagreeable can be an aspect of the beautiful, that the simply agreeable is not necessarily the beautiful, that the beautiful must be described as a tension of opposing forces." <sup>14</sup>

#### The phases of romance.

As with comedy, romance is examined by Frye in six phases, and if his suggestion that "the phases form a cyclical sequence in the romantic hero's life" is sound, then we may expect to find traces of these phases in the sections of 'Briggflatts'.

The first phase, the myth of the birth of the hero, points in its symbolism to Section V and the Coda, the time of rebirth. The image of the small boat floating on the sea there is reminiscent of other arks or chests containing infant heroes, of the water and boat at the start of Dante's Purgatorio, of the Ark "with the potency of all future life

contained in it, floating on the waters" (A.C., p.198).

This feeling is mitigated, it must be said, by the fact that this vision of rebirth occurs in old age, with life all but spent. Thus the boat remains an image only, a figment or trick of the imagination, and starlight is not flesh but "almost" flesh:

Capella floats from the north  
with shields hung on his gunwale.  
That is no dinghy's lantern  
occulted by the swell - Betelgeuse,  
calling behind him to Rigel.  
Starlight is almost flesh.

(C.P., p.69)

Similarly the poet knows that "The star you steer by is gone" and that starlight on water forms "lures for spent fish," as if the young poet seen as "unseasonable salmon" in 'Villon' has now become too old to accomplish more than this final poetic effort. Even the artistic triumph, the treasure of the poem, is ambiguous, for "the volume indexed and shelved, / dust on its marbled leaves" echoes in its imagery the grim opening of the Preface: "A man who collects his poems screws together the boards of his coffin." So the poem moves towards the ambiguity of the final couplet.

Yet this ambiguity does not for me destroy the overall sense of achievement: it means merely that the apotheosis is tinged by Bunting's usual concern for the facts of experience, and the poem offers no false hopes or promises, but rather balances sublimity and objectivity, love and death, with a poise that recalls "the equilibrium of great tragedy" which M. Mahood finds at the end of Romeo and Juliet, the victory of time over the lovers being counterpoised by their victory "not only over time and society which would have made them old and worldly in the end ... but over the most insidious enemy of love, the inner hostility that 'builds a Hell in Heaven's despite.'" <sup>15</sup>

Thus, although the poet's "victory" over the inner hostility that is recorded at the end of Section I is won fifty years too late, the image of the boat on the sea is followed by images of the returning Spring: "icicle's gone" and the reviving waters of life replace the waters of death, as the "strong song" of future poems is accompanied by "rain slant, spray flick."

It is interesting that Frye links providential birds with this idea, the "raven and dove in the Noah story, the ravens feeding Elijah in the wilderness, the dove hovering over Jesus" (A.C., p.199). This would explain the effect Bunting is seeking to achieve in the lines,

Even a bangle of birds  
to bind sleeve to wrist  
as west wind waves to east  
a just perceptible greeting -  
sinews ripple the weave,  
threads flex, slew, hues meeting,  
parting in whey-blue haze.

(C.P., p.68)

Objectively an expansion of the shore scene - a seascape of winter light, wheeling birds and offshore breeze - the conceit of the raised arm of the wind takes on a symbolic aspect. As the vision of a new life takes final shape, the "inspired" poet (cf. the vision of Israfel "whose sigh is Cirrus") salutes his debt to the east, which taught him in his wandering's extreme point the meaning of life: to value both beauty and action; to accept death and destiny since "the spoils are for God." Not the least part of the meaning is the eastern aesthetic of adornment of the central text: here the weave and the flex of threads, which is light, recalls the apparently obscure references in Section IV:

Aiden and Cuthbert put on daylight,  
wires of soft western metal entangled in its soft  
web, many shuttles as midges dancing;  
not for bodily welfare nor pauper theorems  
but splendour to splendour, excepting nothing that is.

(C.P., p.65)

It refers both to Bunting's poetic method of a patient working and reworking of traditional patterns and themes, and also, in the final line above - "splendour to splendour, excepting nothing that is" - to his vision of a sublimity that is rooted in actuality, a poetry which is at once objective and sublime. Since the actuality is the Northumberland coast, let us say the method, and the spiritual endeavour involved, is also that of the early poets and scholars on that ground, of Aiden and Cuthbert, and "Lindisfarne plaited lines" (C.P., p.58).

The second phase of romance concerns the innocent youth of the hero, and the cyclical form of 'Briggflatts' takes us back to Section I. Frye cites, as the most familiar example of this phase, Adam and Eve in Eden before the Fall. "In literature this phase presents a pastoral and Arcadian world, generally a pleasant wooded landscape, full of glades, shaded valleys, murmuring brooks, the moon, and other images linked with the female or maternal aspect of sexual imagery" (A.C., p.200). It might be the very place, with its "apples", "Garsdale" and "Rawthey's madrigal", as "the moon sits on the fell." It is interesting that Frye suggests the kind of "chaste" love that precedes marriage as "the archetype of erotic innocence," such as the love of brother for sister. This would have been, I take it, something like the early relationship between the "two children" -

Stocking to stocking, jersey to jersey,  
head to a hard arm,  
they kiss under rain

(C.P., p.52)

and there is a strong sense of moral taboo in the description of the sexual relationship as there is in the Eden story: the "smell of October apples" precedes this fall, and the serpent-like "shining slowworm" is part of the experience.

Also present, and typical of this phase of romance, is the longing

to enter a lower world, a world of action, found in Johnson's Rasselas or Keats' 'Endymion', which drives the hero out of this paradise and into the world of men:

lest  
insufferable happiness impede  
flight to Stainmore ...

(C.P., p.54)

The structure of Section II of the poem, as we have seen, is shaped by the normal quest theme, which is the third phase of romance. The fourth phase, with its central theme "of the maintaining of the integrity of the innocent world against the assault of experience" (A.C., p.201) - for "innocent" we must read "imaginative" in the poem's connection of inspiration with the early Northumbrian world - has had a less obviously apparent effect on Section III, although it could be argued that a moral allegory, which is the form often taken by this phase, is an apt enough description of a section in which a hero, abandoned by his former companions, climbs with great difficulty "the peak unscaleable" by lesser men, to reach a vision of supernatural light:

till the morning star reflected  
in the glazed crag  
and other light not of the sun  
dawning from above  
lit feathers sweeping snow  
and the limbs of Israfil  
trumpet in hand ...

(C.P., p.63)

In this section, then, Bunting gives his own version of the second book of 'The Faerie Queene' "which forms a natural sequence to the first book, dealing as it does with the more difficult theme of consolidating heroic innocence in this world after the first great quest has been completed" (A.C., p.201), at the end of Section II, as we have seen. That the quest in Bunting's case is a poetic one helps explain some of the terms of his allegory:

Beyond  
 we heard the teeming falls of the dead,  
 saw kelts fall back long-jawed, without flesh,  
 cruel by appetite beyond its term,  
 straining to bright gravel spawning pools.  
 Eddies batter them, borne down to the sea,  
 archipelago of galaxies,  
 zero suspending the void.  
 Banners purple and green flash from its walls,  
 pennants of red, orange blotched pale on blue,  
 glimmer of ancient arms  
 to pen and protect mankind.

(C.P., p.62)

Behind the obvious romance elements of "banners," "pennants" and "ancient arms," the "kelts" here recall the final lines of 'Villon' with their description of the young poet as "unseasonable salmon." Older now, he observes the fate of some companions, his poetic contemporaries of the thirties whose working life is effectively over in terms of new vision or achievement, and who are hurled into oblivion, the void of the sea. This must have seemed to many, and perhaps to Bunting himself, his own fate in the gloomy and difficult years which soured the mood of 'The Well of Lycopolis'. Yet the sea is also connected with soldiering in its "banners" of weed and its "glimmer of ancient arms" and it was through the military life that Bunting climbed above and beyond this again to reach a new perspective on life and literature, as his hero Alexander attains the sublimity of light and a right understanding of his own position. The change of tone in this section between the nightmare mountain journey and the gaeity and exuberance of the "rebate" that follows is as sharply marked as the difference between Bunting's pre- and post-war poetry.

The choice of Alexander as hero is not, I trust, a reflection of Bunting's own estimation of his war service but rather of his characteristic method of bringing together the autobiographical and the literary detail. A quotation from the thirteenth century Spanish romance, Libro de Alexandre, stands at the head of the poem and the



fourteen syllable line which opens Section IV and recurs four times in the first long verse paragraph is a musical echo of the metric of that romance (as are the thirteen alexandrines, which were possibly named from the twelve syllable lines of other medieval poems on Alexander). A Persian version of the legend of Alexander and the Angel occurs in Firdosi's Shahnamah, Bunting's first contact with the culture which was to act as a catalyst on his poetry. Waiting impatiently to be called up between May and December 1939, Bunting delivered "six solid, stolid lectures" (as he described them to Zukofsky in August 1940) for the Workers Educational Association on history from Alexander the Great to the Middle Ages. Finally, Bunting could not fail to be struck by the similarity between the fable of Alexander's adventures in Firdosi and the story of his own in the thirties, forties and fifties:

Alexander wanders through country after country where the most horrible things are going on, and ultimately comes to the mountains of Gog and Magog on the edge of the world. And his troops refuse to follow him, but all alone he climbs up to the top of the mountain, and there he sees the angel sitting exactly as in my poem, with the trumpet ready to his lips to blow, and looking anxiously to the east for the signal to blow the trumpet and put an end to the world. And that of course does Alexander's business for him: he falls off the mountain, comes to, and leads everybody home in peace to Macedonia.<sup>16</sup>

Thus both poet and hero endured a journey through a world of horror and hardship, driven by a desire to excel, and culminating in a vision of death and destiny followed by a sober return to their native land.

Part of the temptation on Bunting's journey, it emerges from Section III, was economic success (or would have been: it was never a real threat to him) and the whole world of finance, the nature of which is seen to corrupt true vision and conduct. Just as one of the main antagonists of Guyon, the knight of temperance, is Mammon, so the imagery of money and its Freudian excremental analogue permeates the lower cliff slopes of the mountain: thus "pebbles worn by tabulation till / only the shell of figures is left" (cf. "Lydian pebbles" of

Section III of 'The Spoils'), "the year would capsize/ where the bank quivers," "Hastor" (Lord Astor presumably, "a Cockney hero" in Notes) with his "dung-thickened lashes," "in the market," "unprofitable motion" (an explicit linking of money and excrement) - all the world of entrepreneurs, "scavengers / whose palms scoop droppings to mould / cakes for hungry towns."

The influence of Bunting's Northumbrian background cannot be discounted, with its long and bitter memories of the depression years, but basically he is at his most Poundian here (despite his early Fabian affiliation, he is no socialist). It is not a wholly admirable role, nor a particularly successful one either in politics or, more important here, in poetry - the target is too obvious perhaps - but he makes a good enough job of it, the tone of relish possibly deriving more from the joy of literary pastiche than from a present commitment to these economic views. (Bunting was, however, city editor of his newspaper in Newcastle when he wrote 'Briggflatts', much of it on the train going to work. Is this, then, his revenge on a financial system which, he complains in Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal, consumed so much of his energy on "the same bloody job.... I don't think they could get anyone else to do such dreary work or such heavy work for anything like the rate they pay me"?) In any case, the mason's apprentice shows himself to be more craftsmanlike than "il miglior fabbro" here, in that the views are given their proper place in the autobiography in terms both of space and time, and do not unbalance the structure as Pound's tend to do.

The fifth phase of romance, corresponding to the fifth phase of comedy, is less in evidence in Section IV, dominated as it is by ironic themes. Yet the prominence given to the natural cycle in it, as reflected in the opening line, "Grass caught in willow tells the flood's height that has subsided," and the autumnal mood of the whole, do reflect

"a contemplative withdrawal from or sequel to action, rather than a youthful preparation for it" (A.C., p.202) -

A closing door  
stirs smoke's flow above the grate,  
I hear Aneurin number the dead and rejoice ...  
(C.P., p.65)

This section, too, finally "presents experiences as comprehended and not as a mystery" (A.C., p.202) in its second half: "As the player's breath warms the fipple the tone clears" and the language expresses simplicity and tenderness:

Her scones are greased with fat of fried bacon,  
her blanket comforts my belly like the south.  
(C.P., p.66)

The experience is comprehended. The betrayal takes place in a landscape symbolic of harshness, loss and sterility:

Cobweb hair on the morning,  
a puff would blow it away.  
Rime is crisp on the bent,  
ruts stone-hard, frost spangles fleece.  
What breeze will fill that sleeve limp on the line?  
A boy's jet steams from the wall, time from the year,  
care from deed and undoing.  
Shamble, cold, content with beer and pickles,  
towards a taciturn lodging among strangers.  
(C.P., p.66)

In poetic terms then its result was the sterility of silence in "a taciturn lodging": now this is balanced by the success of the pattern of the poem as we note how the force of the simplest human gesture of greeting or farewell, here so sadly missing in the limp sleeve, echoes other images of clothed arms in other sections of the poem - "jersey to jersey / head to a hard arm" (Section I), "Under his right oter the loom of his sweep" (Section II), "the limbs of Israfel, / trumpet in hand" (Section III), the negative "Lice in its seams ... crawl with toil to glimpse from its shoulder" (Section IV), and the "bangle of

birds / to bind sleeve to wrist" (Section V).

The experience is comprehended, then, because we begin to understand Bunting's method and purpose: taking one line from those quoted above, "Cobweb hair on the morning," we realise that this explains everything, in contradiction to the previous page where a "mist of spiderlines / bearing the rainbow" was part of the clue that would lead us to "understand nothing" (although the subsiding of the flood in the section's opening line and the appearance of the rainbow should have given us a clue that new life was but a page's turn away). What is so slight and delicate that "a puff would blow it away" is seen to be enduring in the poet's mind, and is made permanent in the minds of others through his art: this image is linked with the spider "Riding silk, adrift on noon" at the height of Section II (C.P., p.59) as the "Rime" harks back to Section II (C.P., p.58) and the "fleece" leads on to "The ewes are heavy with lamb" in Section V. Thus with all the delicate insistence of music, the incremental patterns of the poem "with never a boast or a see-here" recreate the beauty and strength of the central experiences of one man's life for our contemplation.

The completion of the movement from active to contemplative adventure occurs in Section V with the sixth phase of romance, similar in atmosphere to the sixth phase of comedy already examined. Its central image is that of the old man, the poet as "the lonely hermit absorbed in occult or magical studies," (A.C., p.202) namely the bringing of the past to life in such a way that "Then is Now."

### Section III Autumn/Tragedy

The form of Section III is determined more by the generic plot of tragedy, the mythos of autumn, than by direct autobiography. That the section ends in serenity rather than disaster does not exclude it from

being termed tragic: but the influence of the tendency of romance to make pity and terror "modes of pleasure, usually the beautiful and the sublime respectively" (A.C., p.301) does distract us from the tragic form.

Yet tragedy it is, in its concentration on the single individual, Alexander, who is great compared with us but powerless in face of fate, destiny or the will of God. He is placed on top of the wheel of fortune, poised on the mountain between earth and heaven, between the human society he has left below in bondage "at the patrolled bounds / where captives thicken to gaze" (C.P., p.61) and the greater power in the sky, the "other light not of the sun." Alexander possesses something of the reserve of other tragic heroes "wrapped in the mystery of their communion with that something beyond which we can only see through them" (A.C., p.208), a characteristic which he shares with the pilot of Section II, another type of the poet, carried by his "craft" to mysterious regions: "Nothing he sees / they see, but hate and serve" (C.P., p.56). Finally, Alexander's action leads up to an "epiphany of law" (A.C., p.208), an awareness of "what's to be, is, and has been," as Bunting terms it elsewhere (C.P., p.44), in this case a sudden glimpse of the essential frailty and impermanence of man:

When will the signal come  
to summon man to his clay?

(C.P., p.63)

The crucial influence of Islamic culture on Bunting is pointed to in his choice of Israfil "intent on the east" as oracle although a similar mountain-top epiphany in a northern setting occurs at the end of 'The Spoils' ("From Largo Law look down ..."), a poem which also leads up to an acceptance of death: "as good a grave as any, earth or water" (C.P., p.48).

Israfel's presence is in itself a serious enough warning to those who, whether as poets or soldiers, aspire to great heights of achievement. In the larger perspective of its reference to the central emotional relationship of the poem, however, this section would seem to take the simple but powerful structure of revenge tragedy: the original betrayal or overbalancing of natural law in the murder of love sets up an opposing movement in which the hero is made to endure the consequences of his choice. The power of a world of disease, treachery, corruption, negation and self-disgust to flay the sensitive spirit (the characters and landscape encountered by Alexander are analogous to the "bogus" world of Section II) is amply documented in the pre-war poems, perhaps most bitterly in Ode 10, "Chorus of Furies":

Let us come to him first as in a dream,  
anonymous triple presence,  
memory made substance and tally of heart's rot:  
then in the waking Now be demonstrable, seem  
sole aspect of being's essence,  
coffin to the living touch, self's Iscariot.

(C.P., p.96)

We note there Bunting's inability to link Then and Now as he does in 'Briggflatts': memory takes shape as monstrosity, guilt remains unexpiated and the haunted man will envy "the stress / of infinite remorse." The revenge comes, as frequently in tragedy, from another world. This is also the case in Section III, and with this nemesis the imbalance in nature is righted as the poet, recognising like Alexander the futility of his self-imposed exile and Parnassian ambitions, comes down to earth - in a fortunate fall, as we shall see.

If Bunting's rhetoric seems at times Miltonic in this section - for example in the description of the hero reaching "to a crack in the rock / with some scorn, resolute though in doubt," or in the serenity of the close, "So he rose and led home quietly through quiet woodland"

this possibly derives from the body of Biblical knowledge which the two poets share. The second part of the section reveals that Bunting takes the Christian view which "sees tragedy as an episode in the divine comedy, the larger scheme of redemption and resurrection" (A.C., p.215).

As one might suspect, the phase of tragedy corresponding to the central quest myth of romance (the third phase) best explains the binary form of this section. In this phase "a strong emphasis is thrown on the success or completeness of the hero's achievement" (A.C., p.220). Frye cites here the Passion, and other tragedies in which the hero is related to Christ, as is the case in 'Briggflatts'. He notes that "the paradox of victory within tragedy may be expressed by a double perspective in the action," and this is certainly the effect here in the juxtaposition of heaven and earth, east and west, death and the resurrection immediately following the mountain-top epiphany in the "rebate" that follows (the very word, and other images which follow, an echo in a sane world of the insane money imagery of the early part of the section):

Vaults stored with slugs to relish,  
my quilt a litter of husks, I prosper  
lying low, little concerned.

(C.P., p.63)

Nothing like such clarity and assurance of image and tone in personal affairs had been achieved since 'Chomei at Toyama'. The autumnal world is perceived as religious or spiritual ("I polish / my side on pillars of its transept") as well as musical ("Sycamore seed twirling, / O, writhe to its measure!") and there is no sense here of resignation to Fate, but rather of a fullness and richness which leads naturally to the serenity of the final lines.

That the third phase is often "a sequel to a previous tragic or heroic action, and comes at the end of a heroic life" (A.C., p.221)

helps us to see the significance of this episode. The previous tragic action was, of course, the leaving of Northumberland and Peggy Greenbank, yet the paradox is that, without speculating on roads not taken, artistically nothing of worth could have been produced if Bunting had not gone alone to encounter Paris, Pound, and Persian literature. (Although this view is contradicted on page 69 of the recent meantime interview, it seems to be inherent in the poem). Even with these advantages the way was not easy. The movement of seeming death to rebirth may refer to the renewal of creative life in 'The Spoils' after the hiatus of war, but more likely points to Bunting's isolation and poverty and silence in England after returning from Persia: in 1963 he spoke to Jonathan Williams of his poetic bones "presumably left bleaching on the sandhills some distance back.... I've not had the leisure you need to write poetry for many years now. Since I was thrown out of Persia by Dr. Mosadeqq, my life has been one of struggling to keep my belly filled and my children's bellies filled, and no time whatever for literary preoccupations."

Yet the time was not wasted. The poet renewed his acquaintance with the landscape and life of his native north country to an extent which merited his identification with the slowworm's world. To walk "silently" now became acceptable, as it had never been before, "where every bough repeated the slowworm's song." For the poet far from the metropolis, taking stock, taking a closer view, may have its advantages:

My eyes sharpen  
when I blink.

(C.P., p.63)

In so doing Bunting was able to climb beyond the ironic world of his early work, and "ripe wheat" replaces the



squandered summer,  
 grain, husk, stem and stubble  
 mildewed; mawkish dough and sour bread.

(C.P., p.33)

Echoes of that early world are present in Section III, due perhaps to the influence of the sixth phase of tragedy which presents "a world of shock and horror in which the central images are images of sparagmos, that is, cannibalism, mutilation, and torture" (A.C., p.222):

where some souse in brine  
 long rotted corpses, others,  
 needier, sneak through saltings  
 to snatch toe, forearm, ear,...

(C.P., p.62)

But as Frye points out, this phase "is more common as a subordinate aspect of tragedy than as its main theme, as unqualified horror or despair makes a difficult cadence." Pointing back in such imagery, however, to the "bogus" world of Section II and forward to the ironic, late autumn turned winter world of Section IV, this section is indeed the pivotal point of the poem. It also shows something of Bunting's post-war mastery of the cadences of both darkness and light.

#### Section IV Winter/irony

Something of the imagery of Section IV has already been examined, especially of the second part of it. As a whole this complex section, a parody of the romance virtues implicit or explicit elsewhere in the poem, "attempts to give form to the shifting ambiguities and complexities of unidealised existence" (A.C., p.223). The great poem has not yet been written. The hero, like Bunting in the fifties and sixties, is back where he started from: the setting is on the banks of a northern river, the language is of the north ("skald," "skerry," "hoy," "girdle"), the fells reek not only of hearth smoke but of history, redolent of ancient ancestry and precedent, poets and scholars who had created an

enduring monument for themselves in words on this ground.

The section veers towards satire: the attitude of the author is not suppressed as in irony, and the implicit moral norm of art (as practised by Aneurin, Taliesin and Scarlatti, without pretension or pedantry) recurs in the lines devoted to artists, justifying the "penury / filth, disgust and fury" which were the price set on beauty in Bunting's case that he might "reject the bait / yet gnaw the best."

Also present as a satiric element is the grotesque identification of animal and human throughout: dead "game," "cruel owls," "fox," "runts," "lice" and "rat".

The section seems to correspond to Frye's second phase of satire, which in turn corresponds to the second phase of comedy which gave shape to Section I. The most common counterpart in satire to this comedy is the picaresque novel, and something of the successful rogue survives in the image of the poet as the successful rat who "gnaws the best."

A central theme of this phase, however, is the ridicule of the values on which conventional wisdom is based, the satirist demonstrating "the infinite variety of what men do by showing the futility, not only of saying what they ought to do, but even of attempts to systematize or formulate a coherent scheme of what they do" (A.C., p.229). The infinite variety is reflected here in the wide range of matter - slaughter, poetry, religion, music, love, betrayal, bravery - often paradoxically linked:

I hear Aneurin number the dead and rejoice,  
being adult male of a merciless species.

(C.P., p.65)

The futility of formulation of "pauper theorems," is directly criticised:

Can you trace shuttles thrown  
like drops from a fountain, spray, mist of spiderlines ...

(C.P., p.65)

This attitude is deeply held by Bunting, stretching back at least as far as the criticism in 'Villon' of anthropometrics and of any attempted measurement of sublimity. It is part of his grudge against reductivist literary critics, biographers and thesismongers (the critic of Bunting's work is liable to be made to feel like one of the runts who "murder sacred calves of the sea by rule") and indeed is part of the guiding spirit of his approach to poetry: "but splendour to splendour, excepting nothing that is."

Thus poets of a certain type are criticised in comparison with

Aneurin and Taliesin, cruel owls  
for whom it is never altogether dark, crying  
before the rules made poetry a pedant's game...

(C.P., p.65)

lines which are again reminiscent of the early contrast between Villon and the pedantic Marot.

Attempts at systematic thought, then, are to be mocked as naive compared with experience: "Insofar as the satirist has a 'position' of his own, it is the preference of practice to theory, experience to metaphysics" (A.C., p.230), and this, as we have seen, is frequently Bunting's view. It is interesting that Frye sees this view not as anti-philosophical but as "an expression of the hypothetical form of art.... the special kind of art that defends its own creative detachment" (A.C., p.231). Thus we find Bunting writing in his article "What about Herbert Read?" (op.cit., p.45), "Either a work of art is its own justification or art crumbles to propaganda and advertisement. Yet we in the West have set such a monstrous moral value on utility that we blush to remember we have sung for the fun of it like birds."

Against the complex and rationalized absurdities of society Bunting evokes pastoral values, the simple standards of his early life in Briggflatts:

The fells reek of her hearth's scent,  
 her girdle is greased with lard;  
 hunger is stayed on her settle, lust in her bed.

(C.P., p.66)

In contrast to such simple certainties, however, the first part of Section IV has the fragmentary, riddling quality of much ironic fiction, emphasising the difficulties of communication: "Follow the clue patiently and you will understand nothing." But the poet does, of course, present enough clues to enable the reader to make sense of his utterings. The two cruces which it seems most important to examine are the lines dealing with the saints of the Celtic Church (what is their function at this point and in relation to the whole work?) and also the following lines:

Lice in its seams despise the jacket shrunk to the world's core,  
 crawl with toil to glimpse  
 from its shoulder walls of flame which could they reach  
 they'd crackle like popcorn in a skillet.

(C.P., p.66)

These lines appear to balance the epiphany of light in Section III. An aspect of the extreme sixth phase of irony, they represent "the point of demonic epiphany, the dark tower and prison of endless pain, the city of dreadful night in the desert, or, with a more erudite irony, the tour abolie, the goal of the quest that isn't there" (A.C., pp. 238-239).

But Bunting has gone through this blasted world in Section II and now starts to climb, like Dante, from hell at "the world's core" to the other side of the world to see the stars:

and stars and lakes  
 echo him ...

(C.P., p.68)

Section IV thus looks both backwards through its dark imagery to the negative world of power politics, violence and confusion of Sections II and III, and forward to the apotheosis of Section V, where the world of comedy begins with "Solstice past, / years and crescendo." This forward

looking movement is achieved not least through the imagery of music, poetry and religion, as the bardic poets Aneurin and Taliesin precede "the harp" of Section V and the Celtic saints anticipate "Lindisfarne" with its historical connections with the Celtic Church.

Each saint mentioned in Section IV is significant in some way in Bunting's estimation of the values which are interwoven in the texture of his life and poetry. As an atheist he does not value the stale dogmatism of organised religion: to a priest Latin may be "bland" (C.P., p.65), but to the poet it means the language and techniques of Catullus, Lucretius and Horace. Yet he responds to Columba's combination of "constructive statesmanship" (there were no martyrs in the Celtic Church) with "spiritual and intellectual integrity,"<sup>17</sup> as well as to his membership of the Tara dynasty famous for its patronage of poets and Latin learning. At this point in the poem Columba is a counterpoise to Bloodaxe in Section II: although the Viking raids sapped the strength of Iona and in 825 the community there was massacred, the final victory of splendour is Columba's - while Bloodaxe's life falls apart, "ravelled and worn past splice, / yarns falling to staple" (C.P., p.58). In contrast, the image of the busy loom, combining beauty and strength, is for Columba:

wires of soft western metal entangled in its soft  
web, many shuttles as midges dancing ...

(C.P., p.65).

This image extends naturally to the whole poem, the seamless garment of sound, meaning, literary and personal experience, impossible to disentangle without damage; and to this section in particular as it rehearses and recapitulates the poem's themes.

Columbanus was the most famous of the peregrini who left their country for the sake of a religious ideal and founded strictly disciplined communities in distant lands. (A parallel might be made with Pound and

Bunting with their religion of art at Rapallo). Like Columba a writer, "the impetus which his foundations gave to learning and to books, and to the realization of the potential revolution in the art of writing, extends far beyond his personal literary achievement." <sup>18</sup>

With Aidan and Cuthbert we come closer to the facts of Bunting's position at the period of his life referred to in this section: the austerities of Aidan's life on Lindisfarne; Cuthbert's interests in archaeology and natural history, his outlook on life which can only be termed objectivist (Bede describes him wandering round Lindisfarne during the long summer nights "inspecting and examining everything"), and the living record of him still in local speech, in which "Cuddy's ducks" is the name for the eider duck and "St. Cuthbert's Beads" for a local variety of seaweed.

The reader of Bunting's poetry cannot fail to be struck by the rich ornament of internal rhyme and alliteration there, and these qualities too Bunting must have been aware of sharing not only with Aneurin and Taliesin but also with the early saints: "the Irish monks seized upon rhyme and made it a regular ornament of poetry long before it became customary elsewhere," <sup>19</sup> and the influence of their "new form" (nua-cruth) on the Irish Dan Direch and the Welsh Cynganedd is well enough known, so that consonance, assonance and alliteration became the norm.

The question arises of how much of this background emerges as a resonance from the text itself and how much must be researched. That a poem may send a reader back to primary sources is no bad thing in itself and I think Bunting may see education (through suggestion or interest, not propaganda: his Notes are often deliberately off-hand) as a by-product of verse. But in a poem to be read aloud what will be conveyed through the sound without the encyclopaedia's amplification?

The first part of Section IV is meant to convey a sense of mystery at the process of history ("Today's posts are piles to drive into the quaggy past ...") and a sense of the multifarious quality of mankind's doings. Thus the reader's confusion may be said to be part of the general mystification of the satirical form. Moreover (and particularly for the listener rather than the reader), even the mere echo of a name from the past may be enough to convey a sense of the past as present here and now - "I hear Aneurin number the dead, his nipped voice" - so striking in this section.

As to the validity of the Celtic correspondences, the influence of ancestral traits is a legitimate object of contemplation in a poem of autobiography, the poet's blood combining the influence of Norse,

Copper-wire moustache,  
sea-reflecting eyes  
and Baltic plainsong speech ...

with the more ancient Celtic ancestry: "To seek out and watch and love Nature, in its tiniest phenomena as in its grandest, was given to no people so early and so fully as to the Celt." 20

In a poem set so firmly in its home ground it is no surprise to find that form and artifice merge so naturally with the historical background:

Perhaps the most fundamental [quality] is its originality, the choice and combination of motifs, chiefly from the world of nature, the animal and vegetable world, with only occasional and incidental human elements, the whole forming a fantastic creation of the imagination, remote from reality. An invariable element ... is the refinement of mind which inspires the compositions [and] expresses itself everywhere in delicacy of line, an unerring artistic taste in the use of flowing curves and their purpose in a given design." 21

The passage concerns Celtic art, but with only a slight increase in the human emphasis might almost be a description of Bunting's method.

It is interesting, with regard to Bunting's "plaited lines," that the colours of one of the masterpieces of Celtic illumination, the Book

of Durrow, are identical with those of later Syrian manuscripts probably of archaic tradition: "The manuscript contains several pages devoted wholly to ornamentation, reminding one of the beautiful Oriental carpets which may indeed have been one of the means of transmitting their designs, owing to the ready portability of fabrics." 22

Ancient cultural trade routes between East and West were reopened by Pound and Bunting and used to advantage by both (Bunting concentrating wisely on his own Persian markets). The reminder of this activity is appropriate here, marking the return from Alexander's world to Lindisfarne. Carpets from Persia hang on the walls of Bunting's home; and we have seen how the image of woven fabric is powerfully used in Section IV and at the start of Section V.

But though the poetic surface is as delicately woven as fabric, the structure is hard as rock, "the text carved by waves / on the skerry." We are reminded that "the vigour of the Celtic tradition throughout the British Isles is most fully represented by the sculptured stone crosses." 23 As the poem moves into the apotheosis of the final section it is fitting to consider that from the beginning the "chisel voice / smoothing the flanks of noise" (C.P., p.32) had been Bunting's ideal, the goal of his quest a poem that would combine the diverse and delicate flux of life with the fixity and formal strength of a work in stone: "the sun's lilt ... caught in the stone's convexity" (C.P., p.32). The symbol of the stone cross points the way: this goal was won not only through coming to terms with his crime against his early religious background but also by identifying in his own life the central Biblical quest myth. Then is Now in a larger than biographical sense, and in the final line of the poem the poet goes to meet his bride in the dark with something of an Orphic air.



The critical method employed in this chapter has had the advantage of explaining why this should be so, and why many other incidents and images of this marvellous poem are precisely as they are. In the process, it seems to me, Bunting's poetic world is opened up: no longer the closed circuit, the grip on facts, the concentrated fixing of our gaze on the texture of things, but rather a broader vision of his work as a whole, the buoyancy that a larger perspective on time and space brings, and the human dimension of relationship, love, suffering and rescue made plain in his own life and in ours.

NOTES TO CHAPTER VI

1. Letters in the author's possession show contempt on Bunting's part and lack of knowledge on Frye's.
2. Basil Bunting to S.V.M. Forde, letter dated 23 May 1972 and quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.243.
3. In conversation, 1 July 1974.
4. A brief explanation of these terms appears in Appendix A.
5. Bunting to Zukofsky, letter dated 16 September 1964.
6. Bernard Bergonzi, Heroes' Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War (London, 1965), p.202.
7. Robert Nye, 'Art and Sacrament', a broadcast reported in The Listener Vol. 94, No. 2438, p.855.
8. C.G. Jung ed., Man and his Symbols (London, 1972), p.125.
9. Bunting to Zukofsky, letter dated 10 June 1946. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.8.
10. Bunting to Zukofsky, letter dated 21 April 1945. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.8.
11. Cyril Connolly, quoted on the back cover of C.P. He reviewed Bunting's work enthusiastically in The Sunday Times, No. 7498 (London, 12 February 1967), p.53.
12. I am indebted for the succinctness of this view to the final chapter of Hazard Adams, The Contexts of Poetry (1965).
13. H. Adams, op.cit., p.192.
14. Ibid., p.193.
15. M. Mahood, Shakespeare's Wordplay (1957). Quoted in L. Lerner, Shakespeare's Tragedies (London, 1968) p.25.
16. 'Basil Bunting Talks About "Briggflatts"', op.cit. Quoted in Forde, op.cit., p.217.
17. Quotation and information from M. Dillon and N. Chadwick, The Celtic Realms (London, 1967), p.182.
18. Ibid., p.189.
19. Ibid., p.231.
20. Ibid., p.282. Quotation from Kuno Meyer, Ancient Irish Poetry p. xii.

21. Ibid., p.288.
22. Ibid., p.309.
23. Ibid., p.313.

## CHAPTER VII : THE MINSTREL'S SONG -

### TWO THEORIES OF COMMUNICATION

This chapter, a codicil to the main testament of the preceding one in which some further explanation of the theory of the archetype was promised, seeks at the same time to answer the larger question of the mode of communication expected by Bunting when his poetry is, as he intends it, heard read aloud. If he is a minstrel or bard, then his songs are surely far more complex and allusive than is customary. Again, to what extent is the listener aware, or expected to be aware, of the quest theme which can be seen in retrospect to underlie 'Briggflatts' and, I have argued, the collected works? Finally, what is the source of the attraction which Bunting's poetry and persona have had, for younger writers and readers especially, in the late sixties and early seventies?

As "a typical or recurring image" (A.C., p.99), the archetype does not seem initially to sort well with the particularity and "objectivity" associated with Bunting's style, yet there are, I have suggested, strongly conventional elements in his poetry which, underpinning the complex surface, serve quite simply to make his art more communicable, more "meaningful", - even though the meaning is felt to be inherent in the structuring of the material and works, at first hearing, below the level of consciousness.

Archetypally poetry may be seen as "poetry as the focus of a community" (A.C., p.99), - a rare enough achievement in modern times, although a bastard line or two continues to flourish in the prose-poetry of commercial advertising copy - but Bunting's return to Northumberland and to local and more clearly personal subject matter may well have brought such considerations to mind. The writing of 'Briggflatts',

moreover, coincided with, and was in part a response to, a resurgence of community and dialect poetry which had its focal point in the Newcastle area at the Morden Tower poetry readings organised by Tom Pickard, a young local poet with whom Bunting had found a strong rapport.

Since the archetype is also "a symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience" (A.C., p.99), a more conscious use of this type of symbol might well be expected in an autobiographical poem concerned with summing and evaluating a whole life's experience of literature: the extensions, for example, of Bunting's pastoral symbolism to Milton, Spenser and the Bible have already been examined. Northrop Frye treats the Bible as a grammar of archetypal symbolism, and the lengthy Biblical studies of a Quaker schooling opened up for Bunting a similar range of imagery, as well as strong narrative and rhythmical structures.

Despite the simplification involved in the present kind of explication, it must be remembered that archetypes "are associative clusters, and differ from signs in being complex variables" (A.C., p.102). Bunting, like other modern writers desiring to keep their archetypes as variable as possible, resists attempts to limit them to a single assignable meaning by altering surface or contextual details. But it is equally important to remember that the stream of literature "like any other stream, seeks the easiest channels first: the poet who uses the expected associations will communicate more rapidly" (A.C., p.103). The rapid success of 'Briggflatts' may be attributed in part to Bunting's decision to abandon his previous procedure of swimming in isolation against the current, and to employ archetypes in a clearer and more conscious way. The pedagogic intention, noted by Jonathan Williams in Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal, of teaching Tom Pickard how to write

a long poem is something to the point here, since good teaching demands clear and coherent exposition, and is a social occupation or work of mercy. But the more important knowledge taught by the poem was that it offered in its symbolism a key to the earlier works and served to enhance Bunting's total reputation: things fell into place in a general way, even though the full significance of particular details had not yet been grasped.

The archetypal critic who "studies the poem as part of poetry, and poetry as part of the total human imitation of nature that we call civilisation" (A.C., p.105), comes closest, I would suggest, to Bunting's intention and method in that poem. Narrative is studied by him as ritual, or "imitation of human action as a whole, and not simply as a mimesis praxeos or imitation of an action" (A.C., p.105), and the ramifications and power of the larger than personal quest narrative of 'Briggflatts' studied in the previous chapter help explain the attractiveness and popularity of that poem (rather as the reader of the Divine Comedy is still carried along by his interest in 'what happens next' on the journey).

At the risk of seeming to offer the Great Chain of Being with a deal of linkage missing, I wish to present the journey between the twin poles of Bunting's universe - the demonic nadir of the early work rising to the apocalyptic zenith of the later vision - in stark terms, believing that this is how the archetypes symbolic of those states guide the listener's consciousness of the direction in which the poetry is moving: standing out like landmarks, flashing like stars, they keep us on the right road over the confusing (though interestingly varied and often sublime) terrain of the Sonatas and Odes.

The world as presented through demonic symbolism is "the world that desire totally rejects: the world of the nightmare and the scapegoat,

of bondage and pain and confusion" (A.C., p.147). Bunting's poetic journey plunges in medias res in 'Villon', since it is not until Section I of 'Briggflatts' has been read that we are aware of the real causes of the fall from grace, and that his protagonist's predicament represents a spiritual and artistic imprisonment as well as a physical incarceration. This is suggested, however, in the closing lines of the poem:

How can I sing with my love in my bosom?  
Unclean, immature and unseasonable salmon.

(C.P., p.17)

The demonic world, indeed, is a world of "perverted or wasted work" (A.C. p.147), of the "flawed fragments" which litter the mason's yard in Section II of 'Briggflatts' and the "numerous cancellations.../ in the damp dustbins amongst the peel" in Ode 11 (C.P., p.97). Instruments of torture are not confined to prisons, nor the demonic archetypes to the Sonatas: the sun is perverted to a torturer with a "red hot poker" to torment the blisters on "scarified bums" in Ode 4 (C.P., p.90), and the nightmare world evoked in the "nightwanderings/ in unlit rooms" and "imps of night" of Ode 2 (C.P., p.88). Positive archetypes, "any image of human desire, such as the city or the garden" (A.C., p.147) become valueless in their turn: "Suburb and city, giftless garden and street" (Ode 7, C.P., p.93). Love, or passion, subsides into "catalepsy" in Ode 3 (C.P., p.89). It is a world of folly, which Bunting persisted in until the last bitter vision of his own "fool's image" in "still or rippled water" had been savoured in 'The Well of Lycopolis' (C.P., p.33).

An artist's development is seldom of a piece, however, and we can see how that marvellously simple, vivid and agnostic poem, 'Chomei at Toyama' (1932) has its own strong existence in Collected Poems between 'Briggflatts' and "First Book of Odes", as it prefigures the later

persona and style while being part of the history of the early work. Bunting was not able at that point to move forward from translation or adaptation to some positive work of his own, and reverted to translation from Persian and Latin, or parody ("one of the central themes of demonic imagery" - A.C., p.147) of Villon and Dante in 'The Well of Lycopolis'.

Bunting found no fulfilment in this sinister world, nor do his readers. Individual fulfilment seems to veer between "the tyrant-leader, inscrutable, ruthless, melancholy, and with an insatiable will, who commands loyalty only if he is egocentric enough to represent the collective ego of his followers" (A.C., p.148) - such types of the poet as Bloodaxe, the pilot and Alexander, or in biographical terms the strength of ambition which kept Bunting going through years of comparative failure - and, at the other extreme, the "pharmakos or sacrificed victim, who has to be killed to strengthen the others" (A.C., p.148), a figure which gives rise to the outcast poet of Odes 12, 19, 28, 29 and 34 ("and this unread memento be the only lasting part of me") as well as to the personae of 'Attis' and 'The Well of Lycopolis'.

Sexual fulfilment is thwarted by a destructive passion, as in Ode 3 and Ode 17, in which the poet Mina Loy is seen as a sea-siren figure:

Weed over meadowgrass, sea over weed,  
no step on the gravel.  
Very likely I shall never meet her again  
or if I do, fear the latch as before.

(C.P., p.103)

Marriage is parodied by the imagery of homosexuality (via Marlowe's Edward II) in the "red hot poker" of Ode 4 and in the "sleek, slick lads" of 'The Well of Lycopolis'; by the perhaps rather mannered machinery of "Lycopolis water" (via Gibbon, the Note informs us) in the same poem; and by the figure of the eunuch and the mocking parody of Milton's famous



sonnet on his dead wife in 'Attis'.

The change from Bunting's pre-war to post-war poetry can be clearly marked in the development of his archetypal imagery from predominantly demonic to apocalyptic symbolism. The harlot, usually a destructive figure, is understood and accepted "in the brothel under the wall" in Section I of 'The Spoils', and a similar change is exhibited in the whole range of archetypes. In the animal world, beasts of prey, such as the tiger of Ode 13, "Fearful symmetry", become a source of wonder in the hawk of 'The Spoils' (Section II) and the vixen of 'Briggflatts' (Section II). The uncultivated heath of Ode 14 ("The ploughland has gone to bent/ and the pasture to heather") and the sandy soil of Ode 31, "O ubi campi", become the gardens, farms and vineyards in the desert of 'The Spoils', Sections I and II. The gallows, or tree of death, in 'Villon' is replaced by the chenar, a marvellous tree provocative of lively music in 'The Spoils' (C.P., p.42), and the city of dreadful night which was London of the twenties and thirties ("nor the days bright even in summer, / nor the grass of the squares green" - C.P., p.32) becomes the Persian city filled with music and art:

Shir-e Khoda's note  
on a dawn-cold radio  
forestalls, outlasts the beat.  
Friday, Sobhi's tales  
keeping boys from their meat.

(C.P., p.43)

There the cells of 'Villon' are transformed into temples or mosques; and the labyrinthine maze of modern life (successfully threaded in Section II of 'Briggflatts') is transformed, in a way that corresponds "to the apocalyptic way or straight road, the highway in the desert for God prophesied by Isaiah" (A.C., p.150), to the certainty of direction revealed in the wartime journey through the desert in Section III of 'The Spoils'. There also we find the final acceptance of the destructive

watery realm which had opened "First Book of Odes" ("Weary on the sea / for sight of land ..."), now "the dear unintelligible ocean" after the poet has gone through the purgatorial fire, which is the only valid reason I can see for his guns singing "for Glasgow burning" (C.P., p.47).

We have already moved, then, into the apocalyptic world, or Bunting's analogies to the heaven of religion, which presents "the categories of reality in the forms of human desire, as indicated by the forms they assume under the work of human civilisation" (A.C., p.141). In Frye's terms, the vegetable world is given human form by the effort which transforms it into garden, farm, grove, or park (accounting perhaps for the poet's inspiration in the garden in Section II of 'Briggflatts'). The animal world is given human form through domestic animals, "of which the sheep has a traditional priority in both Classical and Christian metaphor" (A.C., p.141), and therefore in Bunting's poetry. The form into which human work transforms the mineral world of stone is the city - hence the importance of the figure of the mason in 'Briggflatts' and of the construction of mosques in 'The Spoils'.

The human world, rather than being divided into tyrant and victim, is seen firstly as the society of men - and this is the emphasis of the post-war poetry - and then in terms of One Man, Christ, who unites the human and the divine and with whom the poet-hero of 'Briggflatts' has already been identified in certain respects.

Frye goes on to examine the way in which Christ unites all the previous categories of the vegetable, animal and mineral worlds, being the Tree of Life, the stone whom the builders rejected and the rebuilt temple, and also the Lamb. Many other extensions of metaphorical identification appropriate to apocalyptic imagery may lead to moments of revelation which serve to guide us through the poetry: the unification of building and sexual symbolism in the line "Thatch of his

manhood's home" (C.P., p.53), for example, or the identification of the human body with the vegetable world, traditional in Arcadian imagery, informing the slowworm sequence in Section III of 'Briggflatts'.

Looking at Bunting's work in these terms, we find a growing confidence of vision and of ability to communicate vision. His confident acceptance of Fate, felt most powerfully in his taming of the negative sea by turning it to positive ends through his own qualities of bravery and understanding in Section III of 'The Spoils', would attract to him younger people anxious to find some certainty based not on wishful thinking but on wisdom and experience, and expressed not through preaching but through things experienced and the wisdom of ancient teachings, or archetypal symbols. There is, too, an admirable fearlessness, not bravado, against dissolution and death, which in poetic terms is seen most clearly in his identification of himself with the final, all-dissolving sea, "shaping the shore as a mason / fondles and shapes his stone."

Thus Bunting stands as a Prospero figure, a wise old man or guru, whose complex verbal surface is all to the good: it unites, after all, the riddling significance of the oracle with the clarity of significant images which create meaningful echoes and analogies in the listeners' minds.

This persona has not found universal favour ("a prophet who has read a lot," grumbled Peter Porter in one review), but it points to another possible reason for Bunting's remarkable apotheosis in the sixties (as well as to another use of the word "archetype"): for in Jungian dream analysis one personification of the Self, the final stage of the process of psychological growth and adjustment known as "individuation", is the "wise old man," a Merlin or guru who represents superior insight. <sup>1</sup>

While I am unsure to what extent Jung's theory of the imagery of the collective unconscious is now given any scientific credence, I am certain that part of the strength of 'Briggflatts' comes from the way in which it taps images and symbols which have often before represented the journey towards self-knowledge and transcendence: the listener, so to say, may already have dreamt much of the symbolic significance of the poem, which then, in Keats' terms, may strike him almost as a remembrance of his own thoughts. Certainly there are many correspondences between Bunting's literary and Jung's psychological quest.

In its struggle to free itself from unconsciousness and immaturity, the ego must engage in what Jung called "the battle for deliverance," often symbolised by the battle of a hero with an evil monster of cosmic power, a dragon or, in Bunting's work, a leviathan expressed through the pervasive and destructive sea imagery. This is, in terms of analytical psychology, a conflict of the ego with the shadow, the repressed or unfavourable aspects of the personality. Yet part of the process of growth is the realisation that the shadow exists: the ego must come to terms with and draw strength from the shadow if growth is to continue. Such an assimilation of the darker side of his nature is symbolised in the poet's acceptance of the rat, vixen and spider in Section II of 'Briggflatts', prior to entering the maze at the end of that section.

The maze or labyrinth in all cultures "has the meaning of an entangling and confusing representation of the world of matriarchal consciousness," <sup>2</sup> and the rescue of a maiden from it in many stories symbolises "the liberation of the anima figure from the devouring aspect of the mother image." The young girl in Bunting's case was the memory of Peggy Greenbank, and one important action of this stage of the poem

is to achieve the liberation of the anima, and to admit this female, intuitive and creative area of man's psyche, the inner component necessary for any true creative achievement, which is the poem's theme.

Hero symbols (I have argued in Chapter VI how strongly the structure of 'Briggflatts' resembles the central quest myth of St. George and the dragon) often emerge when the mind needs strengthening, and it may be that the clearer emergence of the hero at this stage of Bunting's career was occasioned by the transition from middle to old age, and the need for a defence of the fully conscious mind against the dissolution of death. The most striking earlier emergence of the hero image, certainly at a time when Bunting's sense of Self needed strengthening against the batterings taken by his ego, was the concentration on, or holding fast to, the epic Shahnamah in the period of transition between early maturity and middle age ("between 35 and 40 in our society" <sup>3</sup>), between the gloom of 'The Well of Lycopolis' and the glow of Persia.

Bunting's movement towards "transcendence," his release from a confining pattern of existence and movement towards maturity, is well charted in 'The Spoils', which employs one of the commonest dream symbols of such transcendence, that of the lonely journey or spiritual pilgrimage "on which the initiate becomes acquainted with the nature of death." 'Briggflatts' continues the journey, since it is "a journey of release, renunciation, and atonement, presided over and fostered by some spirit of compassion," <sup>4</sup> often represented by a mistress or supreme anima figure. While the Jungian analyst cites Sophia or Pallas Athene, Bunting is content with the evocation of an unnamed mistress who is "young but wise."

Symbols of transcendence met on the quest, creatures which emerge from the depths of the ancient Earth Mother and are therefore symbolic of the collective unconscious, include rodents, lizards, snakes and

sometimes fish: hence perhaps the important place given in the later poetry to rat and jerboa (C.P., p.38), lizard, gecko (C.P., p.57), slowworm and snake (C.P., p.38), and flying fish and salmon (C.P., pp.56, 62, 68).

Such psychological relevance of Bunting's images to the deepest facts of existence constitutes one argument for regarding his poetry as almost limitless in scope, reaching in depth what it may be thought to lack in breadth. With the anima, as often, a mediator between this world and the next, as Beatrice for Dante, Bunting is able to move towards the final stage of individuation, the emergence of the Self, "the innermost nucleus of the psyche," manifested in the dreams of men as "a masculine initiator and guardian (an Indian guru), a wise old man, a spirit of nature ..." <sup>5</sup> That Bunting's final persona, then, may serve as a symbol of what younger poets seek, in time, to attain may account for the loyalty which he seems to evoke from them.

Two further symbols of the Self are important for Bunting's poetry. The Self is often represented as an animal, stressing not only our instinctive nature but a necessary relationship with all surrounding nature. This emerges very clearly, we have seen, in the slowworm sequence of Section III of 'Briggflatts'. The final and more enduring symbol of the poem, and of poetry in general for Bunting, is the carved stone: the gravestone of Section I, the stone "fondled and shaped" by the mason in Section V. The choice of this symbol, made from the beginning, for it appears in Section III of 'Villon', is an apt one for Bunting's method of composition - a slow cutting away of irrelevant detail to reveal the final form - and for his vision, for "while the human being is as different as possible from a stone, yet man's innermost centre is in a strange and special way akin to it (perhaps because the stone symbolises mere existence at the furthest remove from

the emotions, feelings, fantasies, and discursive thinking of ego-consciousness). In this sense the stone symbolises what is perhaps the simplest and deepest experience - the experience of something eternal that man can have in those moments when he feels immortal and unalterable." 6

Much of the feeling of strength and endurance found in the final section of 'Briggflatts' is contained in those two sentences. Much of the power of Bunting's work as a whole emerges from consideration of its images of growth and wisdom. These, unobtrusively, "with never a boast or a see-here," nevertheless reveal like the meanders of "Lindisfarne's plaited lines" the final meaning emerging clearly from an intricate and beautiful variety of detail. The meaning is not confined to scholars merely (though they may write the guidebooks), but is open to all who, knowing a little of history and myth, can place the man who worked the design in his context, wonder at his dedication and admire his way with colour and with form.

NOTES TO CHAPTER VII

1. C.G. Jung, op.cit., p. 198.
2. Ibid., p. 125.
3. Ibid., p. 131.
4. Ibid., p. 152.
5. Ibid., p. 196.
6. Ibid., p. 209.



CHAPTER VIII : FINALE - SUBLIME OBJECTIVE

Thus in answer to charges (extreme but possible <sup>1</sup>) that Basil Bunting is an over-literary poet whose bardic stance is riven by other men's voices and expresses itself in a mannered verse of narrow scope through incoherent forms, one could point to his experience of life, so broad that even the apparently abstruse image is grounded in experience; to his experience of many literatures which has reinforced his desire for the spoken word; to his return to the origins of literature through a close and life-long study of the techniques and forms of great masters, and his final transmutation of these into verse singular for variety of pace and emphasis as well as for nobility; to a gradual development away from any possible charge of mannerism to a balanced and musical poetic syntax, expressing in its combination of objective and subjective elements a vision of growing maturity; to his unique development of a form of the long poem, the Sonata, which gives a tighter structure to the typical verse of the ironic age while retaining a subtle articulation of emotion and mood; and finally to a controlling mythical form, a quest theme of voyage and return evident in his greatest poem and in the form of Collected Poems as a whole - a voyage in search of great art, certainly, but one which through its basic recurrence in life as in literature speaks to all men and offers a central core of feeling to which we may deeply respond.

This final sense of the unity of matter and form suggests that Bunting has been possibly the greatest English poet of his generation, certainly to be ranked with the very best, possessing both a craftsmanship and a central core of feeling - the sublime objective of the quest for form (and an objective sublimity, moreover, rooted in the world he experienced) - which make him unique in his time.

This sublimity would bear further comment. In Chapter 4 of her Eras and Modes in English Poetry, Josephine Miles chooses "sublime" as a descriptive term for the whole area of interest of "phrasal" poetry (a mode which, it will be remembered, she contrasts with "stanzaic and active" clausal poems, with their "clearly defined stages and formal external order," as emphasising line by line progression and "invocation without stress on external rhyming or grouping"). Although she exemplifies the phrasal mode in the "sublime and ceremonious world" of eighteenth century poetry, its early models are found as far back as Pindar and Lucretius (whom Bunting translated early in his career) and stretch forward through Spenser, Milton, Keats, Whitman and Pound (each one an influential voice) into the twentieth century. The irregular lines and motions of Bunting's Odes, and his modernist interest in the phrase as musical unit and in enjambment, are pertinent here, as well as the "internal and onomatopoeic sound ... and sublime vocabulary" already encountered in his poetry.

Bunting's preference in his own poetry for a clipped precision should not blind us to admiration for the sublime and full statement. This he most easily encountered in music (although it also explains his admiration for epic) as when reviewing a concert of Schoenberg's 'Gurrelieder' for The Outlook in 1928 he wrote: "I hate a niggard. Let works be vast and artists giving to the limit of their nature. Who, that could build St. Paul's, would potter at bungalows in the suburbs? Who, that could write Iliads, would waste his time on triolets?" Nor is Bunting's irony and bitterness a necessary bar to sublimity, in his own view: in the same article he asserted that "Beethoven was no gentleman. Good manners are incompatible with the sublime." <sup>2</sup>

While it may be that the classical or balanced mode between phrasal and clausal extremes, the "distinct, not merely transitional, balanced

pattern of structure, line and human nature in nature which we call classical," (to use Josephine Miles' description) best describes Bunting's later work, nevertheless her account of "the sublime poem" offers many clues which might be followed up by future critics of Bunting's work. The combination of three major traits of the sublime poem - its cumulative phrasal structure and piling up of nouns and epithets; its vocabulary of cosmic passion and sense impression; and its internal rather than external patterning of sound, the interior tonal shadings and onomatopoeia of its unrhymed verse - makes for "an exceptionally panegyric verse, emotional, pictorial, noble, universal and tonal, rising to the height of heaven and of feeling in the style traditionally known as the grand or sublime." Mutatis mutandis, and allowance made for twentieth century pressures of realism, imagism and even atheism (although Micah, Christ and the Koran are there), that passage in Section III of 'The Spoils' from

Broken booty but usable  
along the littoral, frittering into the south ....

(C.P., p. 46)

to the end of the poem,

What else do we live for, and take part,  
we who would share the spoils?

(C.P., p. 48)

is a fair example of the sublime in the manner of Basil Bunting.

For there indeed is a panegyric for victim and perhaps for victor:

...girls hawked by their mothers  
from tent to tent, Tripoli dark  
under a cone of tracers.  
Old in that war after raising many crosses  
rapped on a tomb at Leptis; no one opened.

It is also emotional, as in the description of a Mediterranean shore

from which heart naked swam  
out to the dear unintelligible ocean.

Yet the emotional tone arises from a clearly pictured landscape where  
Bunting and his companions

discerned nothing indigenous, never a dwelling,  
but on the shore sponges stranded and beyond the reef  
unstayed masts staggering in the swell,  
till we reached readymade villages clamped on cornland,  
empty, Arabs feeding vines to goats ...

The inhabitants and culture of that wartorn culture could offer to the  
soldiers a vision of nobility, however, - if these could avoid the  
Western desire for the final solution :

Blind Bashshar bin Burd saw,  
doubted, glanced back,  
guessed whence, speculated whither.  
Panegyrists, blinder and deaf,  
prophets, exegesists, counsellors of patience  
lie in wait for blood,  
every man with a net.

The Biblical reference in these lines, pointing the implications of  
contemporary politics, is from Micah VII : 2. The Arabic reference,  
appropriately, is to one who was both a poet and a Persian, since the  
poet here and in general is one whose concern is not for attributing  
final meanings but for "thinking with the things as they exist," in  
Zukofsky's phrase:

Bashshar bin Burd was an Arabic poet of Persian race who was  
put to death for heresy in the eighth or ninth century. It's  
not clear exactly what his heresy was, but it seems he "glanced  
back" at the achievements of the Sassanian kings and the  
Zoroastrian religion ... he was probably some kind of pantheist  
... The first great Persians who wrote in Persian, a century or  
more later, thought well of Bashshar, at least as a poet. 3

The reference to "sun", "tide", "Fortune" and "the spoils" (of the  
poem's epigraph from the Koran) complete the universal and tonal effect  
of this passage, and the poet himself rises "to the height of heaven and  
of feeling" in his final vision from the summit, a vision of the  
acceptance of death and destiny:

From Largo Law look down,  
 moon and dry weather, look down  
 on convoy marshalled, filing between mines.  
 Cold northern clear sea-gardens  
 between Lofoten and Spitzbergen,  
 as good a grave as any, earth or water.

Although I am deeply conscious that in comparison with Bunting's poetry the present study is "unclean, immature and unseasonable," nevertheless the attempt will have been worthwhile if it has suggested that, as with Milton, the poet's greatness does not lie so much in his rhetorical expression (though this is very skilful indeed) but in the largeness and importance of the theme which Bunting passes on to the reader from his own sources: the slowly accumulated poetic wisdom of many great ancestors - himself through hard-earned experience their worthy survivor in our time.

NOTES TO CHAPTER VIII

1. See W. E. Parkinson, op. cit., pp.111-112.
2. Basil Bunting, 'Gurrelieder', op. cit., p. 140.
3. Bunting to S.V.M. Forde, letter dated 23 October 1972. Quoted in Forde, op. cit., pp. 184-185.

## APPENDIX A

These notes are organised in the order in which the ideas and terms to which they refer occur in Chapter VI of this thesis. As a generalisation from a work which already examines its material from a "median level of generality" (as Angus Fletcher points out in 'Utopian History and the Anatomy', in Krieger, op.cit.), they should not be expected to act as more than reminders of the meaning and trend of some of Frye's terminology and part of his argument. It is to be hoped that the burden of proof in favour of Frye's system will be carried by the chapter as a whole.

**HISTORICAL CRITICISM: THEORY OF MODES** The first essay in the Anatomy examines in Western literature two cycles of five periods or "modes" (the term presumably deriving from the fact that the strength or power of the hero relative to his world is taken as the modus or measure of the literature of each period).

**ROMANCE** is the mode dealing with an idealised world, in which the typical hero is superior in degree to other men and to his environment.

Since the modes tend to follow each other in historical sequence, romance is followed by the high mimetic and low mimetic periods (q.v. below) and then by a period in which ironic literature predominates. In this **IRONIC AGE**, associated with the literature of late 19th century symbolism and 20th century modernism and realism, one finds that the powers of action or intelligence of the hero are inferior to those assumed in the reader. Poetry of this period will tend towards attitudes of detachment and objectivity, as in the poetry of modernism.

Irony is seen by Frye to be **SHADING INTO MYTH**, in which the hero displays superhuman qualities. From pure myth of this sort, he suggests

a downward movement of DISPLACEMENT, by which mythic characters, structures and events are progressively altered in the direction of plausibility or verisimilitude ("realism"). Irony is the lowest reach of this downward movement, before Frye's characteristic stress on rebirth is reasserted in a countering upward movement returning us to the superhuman dimension. (It is unclear to what extent he considers this already to be taking place in, for example, the literature of science fiction).

**HIGH and LOW MIMETIC MODES** The first of these terms refers to the mode of literature in which the hero is superior to the reader in power and authority, although partaking of the same human existence and being subject to social criticism. It is a mode familiar to us through epics and tragedies.

In the low mimetic mode the hero loses his "heroic" qualities, being roughly equal in his powers of action to ourselves. This is the mode of comedy and realistic fiction.

**THEMATIC MODE** As opposed to the reader's interest in the fictional element of internal characters and plot in a work of literature, the thematic mode relates to works of literature in which, as in lyric poems and essays, the author and his audience are the only characters.

**ARCHETYPAL CRITICISM: THEORY OF MYTHS** In his second essay, Frye is concerned to demonstrate the historical transformations undergone by myths and archetypal conventions, as they metamorphose under cultural pressure through the principle of displacement (q.v. above) and become credible or morally acceptable to different audiences.

Archetypal criticism analyses the dynamics of literary convention: the archetypal hero is always revealed in action, and there is a stress on moments of recognition, reversal and climax. Narratives are considered



in generic terms as recurrent actions or rituals, and this is one meaning of MYTHOS. Another meaning of the term is employed in Frye's analysis of the four archetypal narratives (mythoi) of comedy, romance, tragedy and irony, which are, I think, adequately described in relation to the relevant sections of 'Briggflatts'. It is noteworthy that, in Frye's opinion, such archetypal elements are likely to work on the reader mainly at a subconscious level: the structural principles examined by the critic in explicit and conscious fashion do, however, carry over as a certain perceptible rhythm within the reading of a given story.

PHASES These seem to Frye "to have some literary analogy to the circle of fifths in music." He recognises "six phases of each mythos, three being parallel to the phases of a neighbouring mythos. The first three phases of comedy are parallel to the first three phases of irony and satire, and the second three to the second three of romance. The distinction between an ironic comedy and a comic satire, or between a romantic comedy and a comic romance, is tenuous, but not quite a distinction without a difference" (A.C., p. 177).

At this point some discussions of Frye's work begin to employ such terms as "lunar dialectic", "swirling galaxies" and "Blakean poet-critic", but it is worthwhile re-emphasising that it is at the more closely observed level of the "phase" that he examines literary meaning and functions in particular detail, rather than, as he is sometimes accused of doing, reducing particular works to variations on a single universal story.

APPENDIX B

These lines were sent by Bunting to S.V.M. Forde in February 1973 as the first thirty of his work in progress, although he added that this was a "first draft - many errors and clumsinesses to be cut out or changed" (Forde, op.cit., p. 243). When he showed them to me a year and a half later there seemed, so far as I recollect, little change in the lines, and, he admitted sadly, no further progress in the work.

Such syllables flicker out of grass:  
 'What beckons goes'; and no glide lasts  
 nor wings are ever in even beat long.  
 A male season with paeonies, birds bright under thorn.  
 Light pelts hard now my sun's low,  
 it carves my stone as hail and  
 till day's net drapes the haugh,  
 glaze crackled by flung drops.  
 What use? Elegant hope, fever of tune,  
 new now, next, in the fall, to be dust.  
 Wind shakes a blotch of sun,  
 flatter and tattle willow and oak alike  
 sly as a trout's shadow on gravel.  
 Light stots from stone, sets ridge and kerf quick  
 as shot skins rust from steel. Man of the north  
 subject to being beheaded and cannot avoid it  
 of a race that is naturally given that way.  
 'Uber sophiae sugens' in hourless dark,  
 their midnight shimmers like noon.  
 They clasp that axle fast.

Those who lie with Loki's daughter,  
 jawbones laid to her stiff cheek,  
 hear rocks stir above the goaf;  
 but a land swaddled in light? Listen, make out  
 lightfall singing on a wall mottled grey  
 and the wall growls, tossing light,  
 prow in the tide, boulder in a foss.  
 A man shrivels in many days, eyes thirst for night  
 to scour and shammy the sky  
 thick with dust and breath.

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